

7 BIG NOVELS BY 3 TOP-HAND AUTHORS

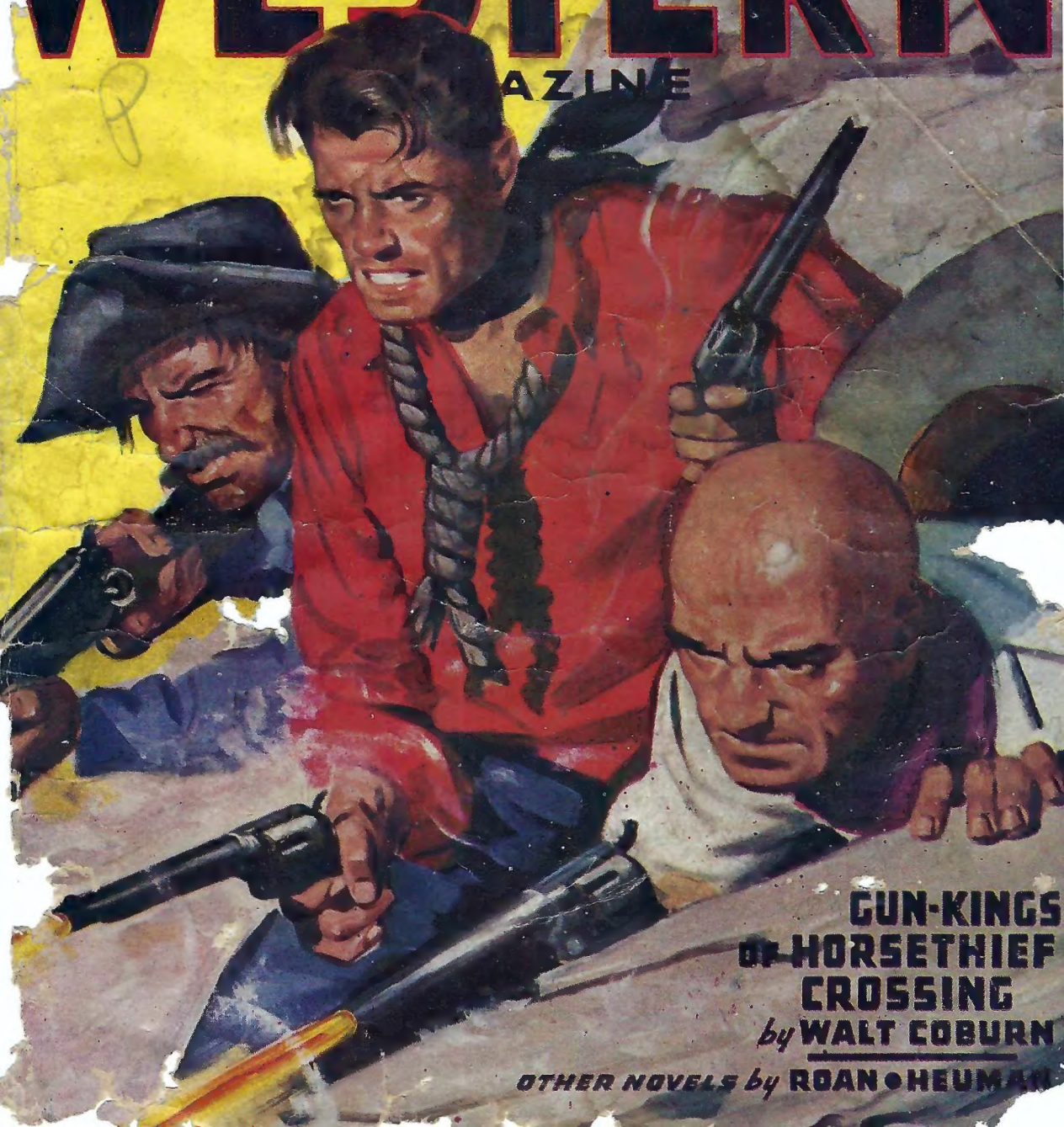
25¢



FEB.

BIG-BOOK WESTERN

MAGAZINE



**GUN-KINGS
OF HORSETHIEF
CROSSING**
by **WALT COBURN**

OTHER NOVELS by **ROAN • HEUMAN**

WHY THOUSANDS SAY...



"It's Lee 6 to 1"

Lee Leadership is built on many sound, proven facts.

The Lee Guarantee... Your Lee garment must look better, fit better, and wear longer than any other you have ever worn, or you can have a new pair free or your money back.

Lee Tailored Sizes... A perfect fit for every build... tall, short, slim, or stout.

Famous Lee Jelt Denim... Made of selected long-fiber cotton and woven into tough, long wearing denim.

Exclusive Lee Fabrics...

Smart colors in really tough, handsome materials.

Fadeproof Fabrics... Many of the exclusive Lee fabrics are vat dyed and fadeproof.

Sanforized... Shrinkage guaranteed less than one per cent.

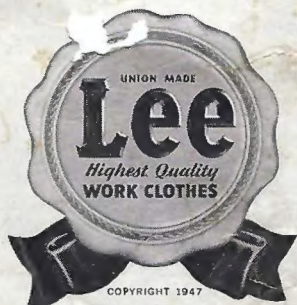
That's why Lee won first place in a nation-wide survey* among working men on the question: "What brand of overalls do you prefer?" *Lee Jelt Denim Overalls led the next brand by a margin of 6 to 1!*

Buy Lee work clothes... at leading stores coast-to-coast.

*Survey made by a prominent publishing company.

THERE'S A LEE FOR EVERY JOB!

JELT DENIM OVERALLS • UNION-ALLS • MATCHED SHIRTS AND PANTS
DUNGAREES • COWBOY PANTS



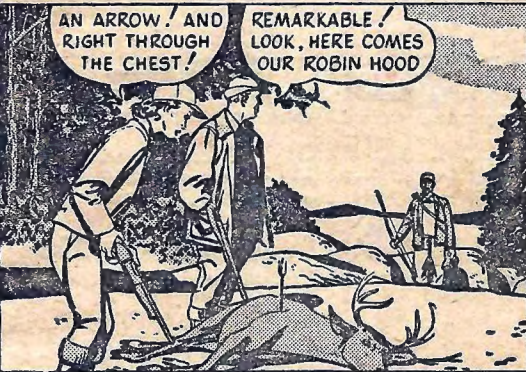
COPYRIGHT 1947

THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.
Kansas City, Mo. • Minneapolis, Minn.
Trenton, N. J. • San Francisco, Calif.
South Bend, Ind. • Salina, Kansas

WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

HERB'S ARROW HIT THE MARK AND THEN...



THREE COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVELS

25¢ **BIG-BOOK** **WESTERN**



ALL STORIES NEW

MAGAZINE

NO SERIALS!

Vol. 19, No. 4

CONTENTS

February, 1947

(Three Big Book-Length Novels)

GUN-KINGS OF HORSETHIEF CROSSING!.....WALT COBURN 8

The only heritage those riders of the twisted trails, Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth, could leave their owlhoot-sired sons was an honest outfit—built on a foundation of Vigilante corpses!

FOR BULLETS, BEANS, AND A BOOTHILL GRAVE!..W.HEUMAN 58

Cowpoke Ed McLain issued a grim gunsmoke invitation to his graze-hungry, river-raiding neighbor: "Sheeper, come and get your needin's!"

BUSHWHACK DAY AT BUCKSKIN RIVER..... TOM ROAN 108

Only the lethal-magic in Sam Easy's gun lay between that little cowtown and a cattle pool invasion that spelled red death!

(Two Smashing Novelettes)

OWLHOOT LAWMAN'S LAST WAR.....ED EARL REPP 40

The debt that Sheriff Dave Gray owed would be paid only when that quick-trigger badge-toter delivered to stern frontier law its rightful due—the corpse of his reckless brother!

FREE GRASS—FREE COFFINS.....WILLIAM R. COX 82

What price could Red Chandor pay for a free range in that graze-grabbing country when the coin of a man's blood and courage could buy only a six-by-two boothill plot?

(Six Gripping Short Stories)

DEAD MEN LEAVE NO TRAIL!.....MARVIN J. JONES 29

BIG EFF'S PEACEFUL BATTLE CALL.....RUEL McDANIEL 35

SODBUSTERS WANTED—DEAD!.....FRANK MORRIS 52

OLD LAWDOGS NEVER DIE.....WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER 76

LAST TALLY.....GUNNISON STEELE 97

THE PISTOL PREACHMENT OF OBADIAH JONES...G.C. OGLE 100

(Two Western Features)

FRONTIER ODDITIES.....ROBBINS AND WAGGENER 6

ROUND-UP.....THE EDITOR 130

NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED JANUARY 17, 1947

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 13, 1945, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1946, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$3.00; other countries \$.75 additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

SCHOOL for VETERANS!

Learn while you earn!

*You're in a class
by yourself with
I.C.S.—and Courses
are free to you
under the G.I. Bill
of Rights!*



• I. C. S. Courses, paid for by the Government, are now available to honorably discharged World War II Veterans. And the Government's investment in your training will NOT be deducted from any future bonus.

• Get started now on your studies for success in business or industry! With I. C. S. you can do this in your spare time *while holding down a job!* You're in a class by yourself. There's no one to

hold you back . . . you progress just as fast as your abilities and ambition permit!

• Courses cover more than 400 commercial and technical subjects—many listed below. Check the subject that interests you—or write it in. We'll send you full information on the Course—and complete instructions on how to enroll with us under the G.I. Bill of Rights. Act now!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS



BOX 3280-W, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses

- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses

- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses

- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting

- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses

- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses

- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses

- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses

- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals

- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses

- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses

- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses

- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses

- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name _____ Age _____ Home Address _____

City _____ State _____ Present Position _____

Working Hours _____ A.M. to _____ P.M. Length of Service in World War II _____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Enrollment under the G.I. Bill of Rights approved for War II Veterans. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

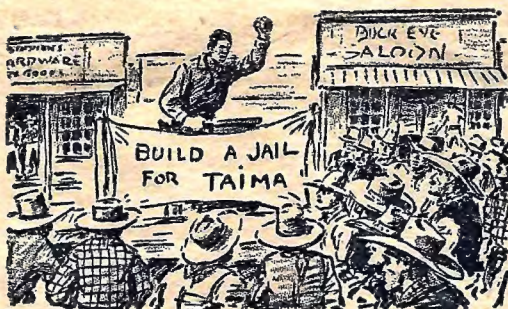
FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



← Holed up at Fort Benton for the winter, trapper Jeed Smithson and three friends dealt themselves a hand in the popular new card game, poker. To make things more interesting, they began to build a kitty to be claimed by the first man to hold a royal flush. Enthusiastically, they played all season and when they left, turned over their hands to four newcomers. Fifty-seven years later, the same game was going strong, the kitty still unclaimed. Finally, in 1872, this great marathon poker game was ended when a professional gambler named Roger Stark drew an all black hand, ace-high, and took the kitty—now a full grown cat—amounting to \$71,000.

→ One of the oddest professions of the Old West was the career of bootblack Michael Spiven of hell-roaring Virginia City. He took great pride in his work, for he was no ordinary shoe-shine boy. Alive, Virginia City citizens cared little for stylishly-buffed leather, but dead they had no choice in the matter, and Spiven made a good living just polishing the boots of the men who died with their boots on. When Spiven himself was killed in a gun battle, there was no one who knew how to wield his brush and cloth. But the miners, knowing how he would have felt about it, tenderly removed the bootblack's muddy shoes and lowered him into a Boothill fighter's grave—barefooted.



← Elliot Crane, civic-minded citizen of Taima, Montana, thought it was a disgrace that this up-and-coming little frontier town possessed no jail. For a year, he pleaded with the reluctant populace, argued with the city fathers and campaigned on the platform of "build a jail for Taima." At last, Crane won his case. A tax bill was passed and a stout new prison was constructed, having walls three feet thick and iron bars the size of a man's arm. Shortly after it opened for business, the Taima jail had its first prisoner, arrested on a charge of drunken disorderliness: it was Elliot Crane.

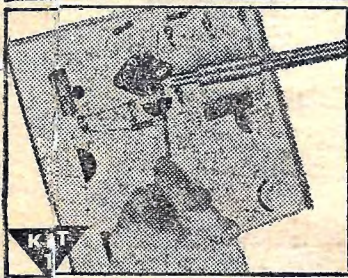
→ The shambling, age-wracked figure of Bard McDowell was beloved and familiar in the streets of Santa Fe, but no one really believed him when he claimed to be 140 years old. When the citizens joshed him, "Tell us about Valley Forge," the old-timer would spin a lurid, breathless story of Western-style bushwhack warfare as it was fought in Old New England. Finally, in 1877, the oldster died. Buried with him was a yellowed document sorrowing strangers found tacked to the wall: an honorable discharge to Bard McDowell, from the Continental Army of the United States—and General George Washington!



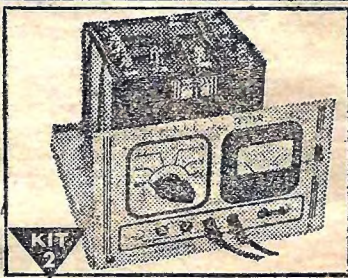


I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

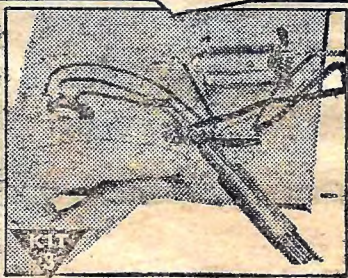
**I Send You
6 Big Kits
of Radio Parts**



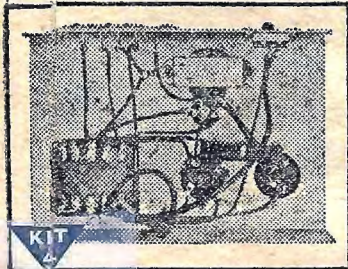
KIT 1
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



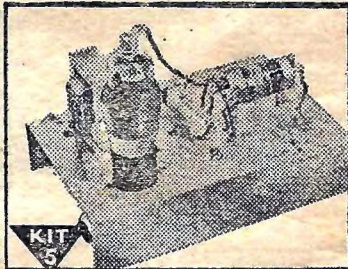
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



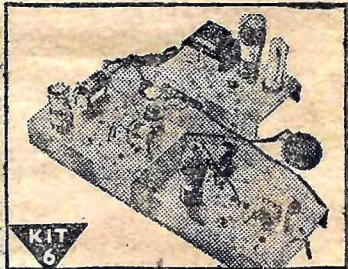
KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4
You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5
Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



KIT 6
You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO - Win Success **I Will Train You at Home - SAMPLE LESSON FREE**

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio," both FREE. See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with 6 BIG KITS OF RADIO I send!

Many Beginners Soon Make Extra Money in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while still learning! It's probably easier to get started now than ever before, because the Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also

and profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even greater opportunities as Television, FM, and Electronic devices become available to the public! Send for FREE books now!

Find Out What NRI Can Do for You

Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my

FREE 64-page book. Read the details about my Course; letters from men I trained; see how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just MAIL COUPON NOW in envelope or paste on penny postal, J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7BS9, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

Approved for Training under GI Bill

Good for Both - FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7BS9
National Radio Institute
Washington 9, D. C.
Mail me FREE, your sample lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....
Address.....
City..... Zone... State.....



**My Course Includes Training in
TELEVISION * ELECTRONICS**

GUN-KINGS OF HORSETHIEF CROSSING!



Tom Blue's voice had a sharp edge. "Me'n my pardner are just spooked enough to shoot. Turn 'em looses!"

A cottonwood tree and quick Vigilante justice waited for Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth. But before those riders of the twisted trails did the dead man's prance, they must live long enough to make one last desperate deal for a game pair of owlhoot-branded youngsters: the building of an honest outfit on the corpse of a hooded, night-riding killer-king!

Chapter I

RED MAN'S MEDICINE

PETE FARNSWORTH was sixteen years old when he came with his father, Hugh Farnsworth, to the abandoned ranch at the mouth of Hell Creek on the Missouri River in Montana. Pete was small-boned and undersized for his age. He was also tow-headed and his eyes were sky blue and his nose was short and his mouth too wide and he had a short blunt jaw.

Pete's undersized stature bothered Hugh Farnsworth, and it cropped out when the man got drunker than usual.

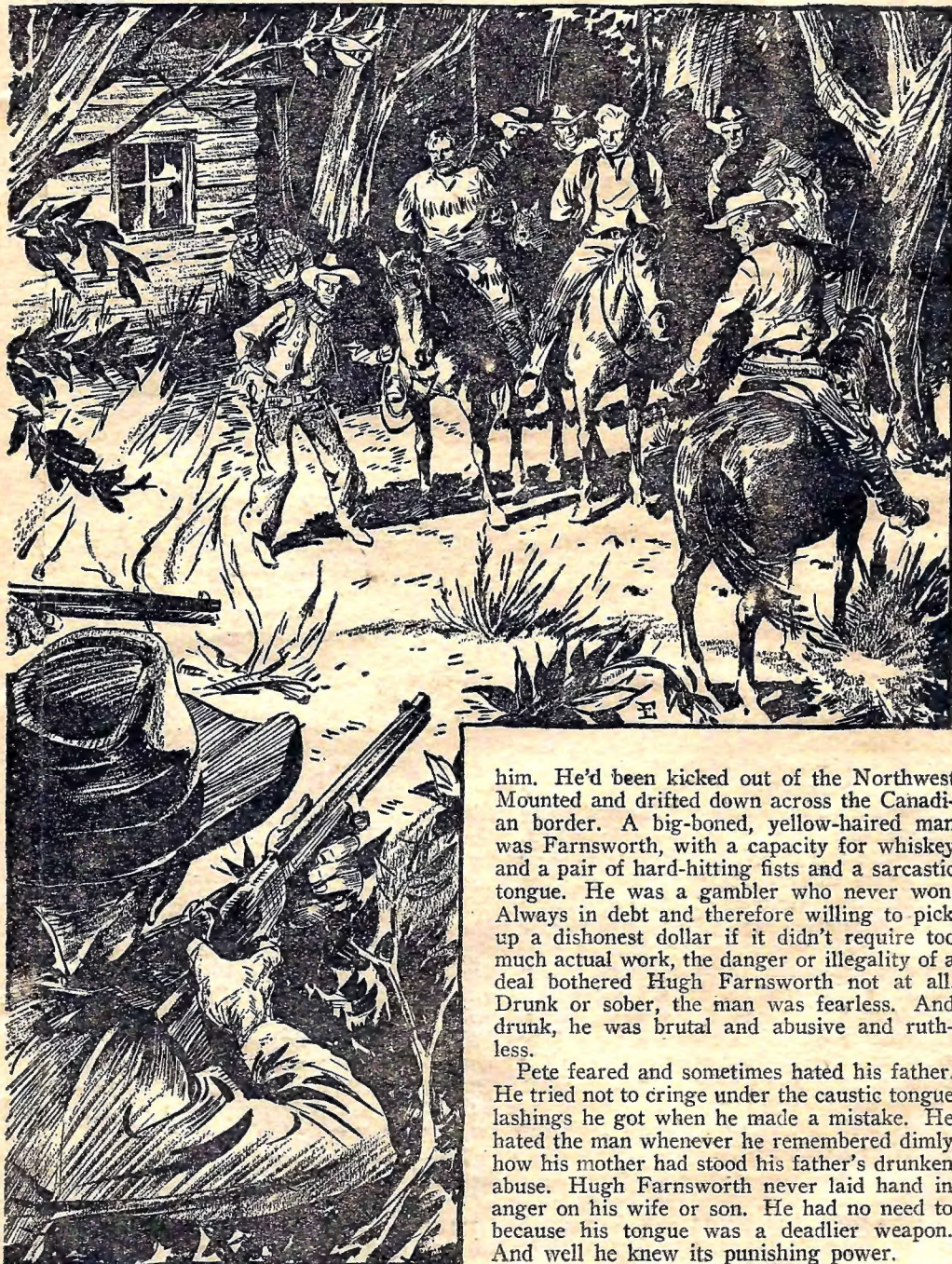
"I can't recall a runt in the Farnsworth family. Regarding your mother's line of ancestry, I can say. I married a nobody—no pedigree."

Hugh Farnsworth was a remittance man. A black sheep, he called himself. Blackleg was the name some of the cowmen had for



Smashing Saga of Vigilante Hangrope Justice!

By **WALT COBURN**



him. He'd been kicked out of the Northwest Mounted and drifted down across the Canadian border. A big-boned, yellow-haired man was Farnsworth, with a capacity for whiskey and a pair of hard-hitting fists and a sarcastic tongue. He was a gambler who never won. Always in debt and therefore willing to pick up a dishonest dollar if it didn't require too much actual work, the danger or illegality of a deal bothered Hugh Farnsworth not at all. Drunk or sober, the man was fearless. And drunk, he was brutal and abusive and ruthless.

Pete feared and sometimes hated his father. He tried not to cringe under the caustic tongue lashings he got when he made a mistake. He hated the man whenever he remembered dimly how his mother had stood his father's drunken abuse. Hugh Farnsworth never laid hand in anger on his wife or son. He had no need to because his tongue was a deadlier weapon. And well he knew its punishing power.

Pete was a little thankful and glad when his mother died. She believed in God and a Heaven where there was peace. Pete was ten years old when she kissed him goodbye and died. Pete had her decently buried by the time his father got back from his two week's drunk in town. A delegation of ranchers in the Cypress Hills had told Hugh Farnsworth that Canada was too small, vast as its Dominion might be, to hold such a blackleg. They had paid him a fair price for his ranch in cash money. Hugh Farnsworth had taken his son Peter and drifted into Montana.

While drifting from one cowtown or mining camp to the next, gambling, turning a crooked deal here or there, mixing with gamblers, road agents, horse thieves and cattle rustlers, Hugh Farnsworth would board Pete out to some family or hire the boy out to a livery barn man or rancher and pick him up in a few weeks or months. Then he would drift on. More than once the law let Hugh Farnsworth off because he had a motherless son to support and look after.

IT WAS after dark when Hugh Farnsworth and Pete shoved a bunch of fifty head of stolen horses down through the strip of badlands to the deserted ranch at the mouth of Hell Creek. A week's supply of grub and their bed-rolls were on pack horses. There was a log cabin and barn and pole corral that were badly in need of repair. Hugh Farnsworth's jug was going empty.

There was a saloon at the Rocky Point Crossing. Hugo Farnsworth told Pete to hold down the place till he got back from Rocky Point. He told him also to clean out the cabin and chink and daub the logs, and keep an eye on the horses. If anybody showed up Pete was to act as stupid as he looked. He pulled out at sunrise, leaving the boy alone.

Young Pete Farnsworth didn't mind being left alone. On the contrary, he welcomed it. It was June and the giant cottonwoods were in full green leaf and there was the smell of wild roses and river mud. A meadowlark warbled its sunrise song. When Hugh Farnsworth had ridden away, young Pete went on foot down to the river bank and walked out onto a long wide sandbar. He skinned off his clothes and waded into the shallow water, naked, with a bar of strong-smelling yellow soap to scrub the dried sweat and dirt off. He was lathering himself when a voice from across the river hailed him.

"Hey, kid!" It was a young voice. "What you doin' in my river?"

The strong yellow soap was in Pete's eyes and he knuckled it out. When he could see he made out a tall boy in faded blue shirt and old overalls riding bareback, watering a little bunch of horses on the sandbar on the south

bank. It struck Pete that the boy looked lonely.

"Who sold you the Missouri River?" Pete shouted across the water.

"Swim over here and I'll show you."

"I can't swim!" Pete let it slip out before he thought.

"Anybody kin swim. You're scared, that's all. You're a coward!"

Hugh Farnsworth was always accusing Pete of being a coward, afraid of everything.

"I suppose," Hugh Farnsworth would size up his son's undersized stature, "I might make a jockey out of you. If you weren't a coward around a horse."

Pete Farnsworth looked out across the Missouri River. It was the first time he had actually looked far across it and it seemed miles wide. He'd crossed Milk River on horseback, swum it on the back of a good swimming-horse. He'd dog-paddled in a few creeks where he could touch bottom. He looked out across the swift wide current and shivered. He was knee deep and the water felt suddenly cold. He reckoned he would drown out there.

The tall boy had slid off his horse and was peeling off his clothes. His taunting challenge came across the river to Pete's soap filled ears.

"I'll swim out half way and meet you and when I'm done holdin' you under, you'll know it's my river."

The boy across the river had his clothes off. He looked tall and slim and brown-skinned like an Injun. Then he was in the water and swimming, his head a round black lump, his long brown arms moving in easy swift overhand strokes as he angled downstream with the current, swimming fast and easily.

"Coward!"

Pete Farnsworth waded in deeper up to his belly, up to his armpits. Then the current pulled his feet out from under him and he was flailing the water with both arms and kicking his feet. He gasped and choked and the water gagged him and he coughed before he got his mouth shut. Panic and the fear of drowning filled him and he fought the water with a furious desperation that winded him. There was an undercurrent dragging at him and he tried to touch bottom and couldn't. He knew he was going to drown and he didn't want to drown. He wanted to live. He sobbed and choked and gasped for breath while the swift treacherous current pulled his head under and he was smothering underneath its terrible weight. His lungs were bursting and he was dizzy and everything went black and he knew he was drowning.

Pete Farnsworth was vomiting water when he came alive. He lay limp on his belly across a big cottonwood log. Somebody astraddle his back was squeezing and pumping water out of him. Sick and shivering and half-drowned as he was, young Pete Farnsworth could hear

the sound of that same voice that had taunted him from across the river. Only now there was no malice or taunting in its sound. Only a sort of contrition and fear.

"..... gosh sakes I thought everybody kin swim—like animals. You must've swallered fifty gallons. You went under so deep I had to dive to git you. You wasn't lyin' when you said you couldn't swim. You ain't a coward. Gosh sakes, don't die on me, kid."

After a while Pete could sit up on the sand. But he kept shivering. The boy had fetched a red Hudson's Bay blanket from Pete's bed-roll and had it wrapped around Pete's shivering naked body.

The boy was tall and slim and his skin was tanned a dark brown all over. He had coarse, straight black hair like an Injun's but his eyes were dark smoky gray. His face was lean and his teeth were the whitest Pete had ever seen.

"I'm Tom Blue—Buck Blue's kid. I guess you've heard about Buck Blue. Buck Blue and Jim Bridger and Liver-Eatin' Johnson—Buckskin scouts. Buck Blue's a squawman like Jim Bridger. I'm a half-blood Sioux and proud of it. I've seen the Sioux dance their sundance. I'm seventeen. How old are you?"

"Sixteen." Pete's jaws ached from clamping shut his chattering teeth. "I'm a runt."

"What's your name?"

"Farnsworth—Pete Farnsworth."

"You're kinda runty, all right." Tom Blue's teeth showed in a grin. His smoky gray eyes almost twinkled. "When I git a catfish under five pounds on my trotline, I throw 'im back in the river. Mebbyso I shoulda throwed you back in."

Pete looked at his undersized body. His white skin looked pale, blueish tinged from the cold. Puny and runty.

"Maybe," said Pete tonelessly, "you shoulda let me drown."

Tom Blue's grin faded. His gray eyes lost their sparkle. He shook his sodden black head.

"No. I was joshin', Pete. You got to get used to my joshin'. I take after Buck Blue. He's a rough joshier. No kid wants to die. Anyhow you can't die now till I tell you because you belong to me. You was drowned and I pumped the water outa you and saved your life. From now on your life belongs to me—till mebbeso some day you save my life. Then that puts us even. But till then you belong to me. I read that in a book so it's got to be so. It was a book called Redskin and Cowboy. I reckon we better take a solemn oath on it—a blood oath. You got a knife in them pants of yours?" The bright sparkle was back in Tom Blue's gray eyes.

Pete nodded. Tom Blue fished in the pockets of Pete's overalls till he found a jackknife. It had two broken smaller blades and the big blade was whetted. Pete stared curiously.

Tom Blue stuck the sharp point of the blade in his own forearm. A trickle of blood showed. He shoved the cut between Pete's blue lips and told him to suck the blood.

Then he took Pete's arm and jabbed the sharp knife point in. Pete hardly felt the pain. The half-breed boy sucked the blood from Pete's cut.

"That does it, Pete. Now raise our right hands and swear. From now on Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth are pardners till death. I solemnly swear it." Tom Blue's voice was a vibrant chant. "You repeat it word for word, Pete."

Pete repeated it. Tom and Pete shook hands. The breed boy said that made them blood brothers from now on until death.

THERE on the banks of the Missouri River in Montana a little after sunrise on a July day in the Eighties, was formed a partnership that was to bind together the lives and destinies of Pete Farnsworth, son of Hugh Farnsworth, British remittance man and black-leg scoundrel, and Tom Blue, half-breed son of Buckskin Blue, one time U. S. Government scout and squawman, rancher, cattle rustler.

From across the river a roaring, bellowing voice lifted in song:

"Oh, the Johnson boys they built a mill,

They built it on the side of a hill.

And when it ran it made no noise

Because 'twas built by the Johnson boys!"

A short, powerfully-built man in dirt-glazed, fringed buckskins stood on the sandbar on the south bank of the Missouri River. A saddle carbine rested in the crook of his arm. His long hair and bushy whiskers were fiery red, his voice a terrible bellow.

"May the howlin' wolves never cease!"

The sunlight caught and was reflected on the blued steel of the carbine barrel.

"That's Buckskin Blue," said the tall, slim, half-breed boy. "My old man."

"What ye got in yonder red blanket, Tom?" bellowed Buckskin Blue. "Ye're not yet dry behind the ears. If it's a young red-blanket squaw ye've stole from the Assiniboine squaw camps, ye'll buy her with your own ponies and none of mine. Ye're too damned young to be takin' a squaw. If ye've stole her, ye'll take her back. Let it never be said that Buckskin Blue's only son turned out to be a squaw camp robber!"

Tom Blue's white teeth showed. He walked to the bank and shouted something in Sioux. Pete understood only the name Farnsworth. The name of Farnsworth brought forth a loud and profane bellow from Buckskin Blue.

"That's Johnny Bull!" Buckskin Blue's mighty roar echoed far back into the badlands

behind the Missouri River and the echoes were flung back across the water, "That conniver-in', lyin' son! It's blacklegs like Hugh Farnsworth that give cattle rustlin' an' horse stealin' a hard name. *Wahshtay wahnitch wahseegee kuzsee. . .*"

"Sioux." Tom Blue grinned. "Means that old man of yours is a no good white man."

"Tell that Hugh Farnsworth to come out from his coyote hole!" Buck Blue bellowed his challenge from the south bank of the river. "I've sent him warnin' to stay away from my river. I'll fight that big Johnny Bull scoun'rel any way, shape er fashion he kin name, an' throw in a few didos of my own invention. I'll claw, bite, kick an' gouge with him. Knife fight 'im. Slow-cut with 'im, chunk fer chunk an' whittle the meat off his bones, till the weak man drops in the bloody chunks of his own whittlin's. Or I'll gun-fight the big, yaller-bellied son of a Britisher duke. Or swim him to death, back an' forth acrost the wide Missouri. Trot out your Hugh Farnsworth or I'll swim the river an' smoke him outa his coyote hole with a gun." Buck Blue cursed the Farnsworth name long and loud.

"He ain't here." Pete's shout had a puny sound. "Hugh Farnsworth ain't here. If he was, he'd be acrost that river right now makin' you eat your braggin'."

Pete Farnsworth didn't understand what prompted him to take it up for Hugh Farnsworth. Mostly, he hated his father. But Hugh Farnsworth wasn't here to defend his name against the drunken maligning of that red-whiskered buckskin squawman.

"Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum!

I smell the stink of an Englishman!

I'll ketch him alive or take 'im dead

An' use his brains to butter my bannock bread!"

Over on the wide sandbar Buckskin Blue leaped high in the air, cracked his moccasined heels together and executed a few fancy steps of some Sioux war dance. His carbine was in one hand, his hunting knife in the other.

"When Buckskin Blue kills a man," said Tom Blue, "he scalps 'im. Buck Blue's lifted a lot of scalps."

Buck Blue had sighted some of the stolen horses Hugh Farnsworth had picked up somewhere and with Pete's help had drifted through the badlands and thrown in on the good feed of the Hell Creek Ranch.

"Fetch them ponies acrost here, Tom!" shouted Buck Blue. "Them's ourn. Strayed acrost the river last night. Fetch me them ponies!"

Tom Blue's grin was flat-lipped as the snarl of a young wolf. His smoky gray eyes were gray agate.

"Buck Blue ain't a-foolin'. Them's my or-

ders. I got to take them ponies off you, Pete."

PETE FARNSWORTH had his orders.

Hugh Farnsworth had left him in charge of the stolen horses with orders to not lose a one. He threw aside the red Hudson's Bay blanket and was on his feet. He was still sick and shaky and weak from the near-drowning. But he squared off with doubled fists to block the way of the taller half-breed boy. Both were naked in the sunlight, there on the sandbar.

"You'll have to git past me to reach the horses. You got to kill me to take 'em, Tom."

Tom Blue nodded. He turned around and reached back and pointed to the scars that criss-crossed his slim brown back.

"I tell the 'breed kids I got them from the torture sun dance. But Buck Blue put 'em there with a rawhide quirt. I'm waitin' for the day when I git big enough an' old enough to tie him to a whuppin' post and quirt him to death. Your old man whup you thataway, Pete?"

"Hugh Farnsworth never laid a hand on me." Pete stared at the ugly scars that marked the 'breed boy's slim, brown back. "But when he gits done cursin' me, I'm sicker'n I got from purty near drownin'. Hugh Farnsworth killed my mother with his dirty cursin' tongue. You got to lick the livin' daylight outa me now, Tom, to take them horses away from me. I reckon you'll have to kill me. We better commence fightin'—Buck Blue's a-hollerin' his head off over yonder."

Tom Blue looked down at the smaller boy. "You shore got guts, Pete. It's a good thing you got me for a pardner to kinda look after you. There's tough kids along this river. They'd gang up on a little runt and shore work you over. But they're scared of me. I got the fear whupped into their doggoned 'breed hides. We're pardners—blood brothers. When the sign comes right, we'll run off together. But the sign ain't right, so we got to outfox my old man and your old man. I call it 'takin' a short-cut' on Buck Blue. Sometimes I git away with it. When I don't—" Tom Blue's grin twisted a little. His scarred back finished the unspoken words.

They were both boys in their teens. School-boy age. But both had been grown men in many ways since they were old enough to learn and remember the things taught them by their fathers and their fathers' hardcase companions. They fought with a grown man's tough wisdom and experience against whatever crossed their trails. And there was an understanding between young Pete Farnsworth and young Tom Blue that had been born and quickly matured and was now about to stand the first test. Their eyes met, lighted. They grinned at each other in the complete

understanding that had no need of useless words.

Then Tom Blue walked to the water's edge and tilted his head a little sideways and upward and gave the most perfect imitation humanly possible of a coyote yapping. One lone coyote at night can sound like a whole pack yapping at the moon and that was the way Tom Blue's coyote howling sounded.

The effect was startling. Across the wide river, Buckskin Blue quit his belligerent bellowing. His war dance and blood curdling threats ceased. He turned and moved swiftly and in a moment was lost to sight in the dense willows and underbrush back of the long sandbar.

"That was the danger signal." Tom Blue picked up Pete's clothes and boots and tossed them at him and gathered up the red blanket. "The signal to coyote. Buckskin Blue takes to the brush mighty quick and easy. He argues it ain't bein' cowardly. Cautious, he calls it. He claims it's all that's saved his scalp a thousand and one times when he was buckskin scoutin' for Miles an' Crook and their cavalry. We better make medicine fast, Pete, to back it up. Buck Blue will quirt the hide off my back if I don't prove I got a big reason for that coyote signal."

From back in the broken badlands came the sound of a gun being fired. Pete began counting aloud.

"One. . . . Two. . . . Three. . . . Four. . . . Five. . . ."

A second shot. Pete again counted to five. At the end of the count of five came a third shot.

"That's Hugh Farnsworth." Pete ducked into the brush and picked up the saddle carbine he had cached there when he came to the river to bathe.

Pete pointed the gun at the sky and pulled the trigger. Counted to five and fired again. And after another count of five he fired the third shot.

Tom Blue strutted about, eyes shining. Quickly he took nimble-witted credit.

"I conjure up that strong medicine, Pete. That proves it to Buck Blue that I ain't lyin'. I conjured up Hugh Farnsworth comin'. My medicine is strong. I'm goin' back now. Meet me here at moonrise. We'll make medicine."

Tom Blue's slim, brown body slid into the river. Pete watched him as he angled downstream and across to the far side.

Chapter II

BUCKSKIN BLUE'S CHALLENGE

COWARDICE was not listed among the faults and shortcomings of big Hugh Farnsworth. Nor was he a man who roared

challenges. He always managed to keep bathed and shaved and cleanly clothed, drunk or sober. He came from the old line of Britishers who dressed for dinner in the evening, regardless.

Hugh Farnsworth asked Pete no questions. Perhaps he had heard the far echoes of Buckskin Blue's roaring bellow as he rode along the river trail from Rocky Point Crossing.

He took his saddle gun and walked to the river's edge. The sun was noon high in the cloudless Montana sky. He stood there on the hard-packed sandbar and called out his answer to Buckskin Blue's mighty challenge and his voice was loud enough to carry across the water without losing any of its cold contempt that matched the hard blue of his eyes.

"Come out of the brush, squawman. Show yourself, Buckskin Blue. I'm Hugh Farnsworth and I've located here at the Hell Creek Ranch."

Across the wide Missouri River, the short, burly, buckskin-clad Buck Blue strode out from behind the willows and out onto the sandbar. And the two men stood there in a waiting silence with the river separating them. Their naked gun barrels glinting in the sunlight.

"Name your game, Johnny Bull!" Buckskin Blue's bellowing roar broke the silence that was freighted with distrust and suspicion and perhaps hatred—or a partnership born of hatred.

"I've named it. This checks the bet to you, Blue."

"This is my river, Johnny Bull. I claim the land on both sides of this crossin'."

"A vigilante hangman's rope,"—there was a cold, toneless threat in the voice of Hugh Farnsworth that was far deadlier than the roaring bellow of the squawman—"makes for a lasting quitclaim deed to all you hold."

"By the eternal burnin' hell, you're the man to know the feel of a hard-twist necktie, Farnsworth!"

"We belong to that common brotherhood, Buck Blue, the fraternal order of the damned. We can hang together, you and I, and perhaps forestall the moment when we hang separately. I coin no new saying. It was written long before our time in the Book of Rogues. Fetch your own whiskey across. You and I have a deal to make."

Hugh Farnsworth turned his big back on the river and the red-whiskered squawman on the far bank, and strode back to his cabin.

Pete had a campfire built. Strong black coffee was simmering and the dutch oven was cooking. Pete' sky-blue eyes watched his big, red-faced, yellow-haired father. Hugh Farnsworth was a handsome man, straight-backed as a British cavalry officer on foot. His hard, cold blue eyes undimmed by whiskey, the bit-

terness that warped his heart and festered inside his brain showed only in the hard, thin line of his mouth. Something far back along his forty years of life had damned the man and burned its black brand deep inside where the hurt was hidden from the world he eyed with bitter cold contempt. No man knew what had turned the younger son of a proud old British line into the blackleg scoundrel Hugh Farnsworth had become. He was not a man to parade his emotions.

Hugh Farnsworth was sober now. He was drinking his second tin cup of the strong black coffee when Tom Blue rowed his father Buckskin Blue across the river. The short, burly, long-maned red-whiskered squawman strode to the cabin with a carbine in the crook of his arm and a gallon crock of whiskey dangling by a rawhide loop from his thick wrist. Buck Blue's eyes, green as bottle glass and as hard, were set under ragged red brows. Barrel-chested, bowlegged, he moved with a quick short stride. For all his compact bulk, Buck Blue was as swift moving as a dwarfed grizzly.

He halted in his moccasin tracks. His buckskins stank of the animal musk and old campfire smoke and tobacco mixed with the kinnikinick that he smoked in a short-stemmed pipe of red Indian pipestone.

Shorter by a head than the giant Britisher, he did not seem to need to look up to meet the cold blue eyes of Hugh Farnsworth. A trick of his short, thick neck thrust his shaggy head forward.

"So our trails finally crossed, eh, Johnny Bull?" Buck Blue's voice was a rumbling growl. His green eyes glittered wickedly.

"The destiny that shapes the ends of the damned, squawman. I have need of a river crossing. I'll test it with those horses I picked up. If the crossing proves safe—" Hugh Farnsworth let the rest of the unfinished sentence hang.

"It's a gravel crossin' for the Johnson Boys." Buck Blue's eyes were slivers of green glass. "But you ain't one of the Johnson Boys. Not from what I hear from the rustlin' of the leaves along the dim trails. For a man who ain't one of the Johnson boys, mister, this river crossin' is boggy. You drop plumb outa sight and you're gone forever."

Pete caught Tom Blue's eyes and sidled around the two men, joining the half-breed boy who was dressed now in a faded old blue shirt, overalls, moccasins and an old black Stetson hat.

"Keep your stench," Hugh Farnsworth said tonelessly, "down wind, Buck Blue. It's offending to a man's nostrils. While we're on the subject of foul odors, I passed by an old cottonwood tree recently where the Vigilantes had left three of the Johnson boys hanging.

I pass along the news for what it might be worth. . . ."

THE big Britisher's eyes held the eyes of the red-whiskered squawman until the slitted green eyes slid away. Buckskin Blue twisted the cork from his jug, tilted it across his upper arm and drank the potent forty-rod whiskey as if it were a drink of cold water needed by a man become suddenly thirsty.

Buck Blue tamped the driftwood stub back in the neck of the brown jug. His voice growled menacingly.

"By the eternal fires of Hell, Farnsworth, if you had a double-crossin' hand in their Vigilante lynchin', you'll soon be wishin' you'd been born dead. The Johnson boys is stronger than the damned Vigilantes."

"Don't waste your threats on me." Hugh Farnsworth smiled thinly.

He looked past the burly squawman to size up Buckskin Blue's half-breed son with something not unlike faint approval.

"That's my boy Tom. Tom Blue." Pride crept into Buck Blue's growl. "Best riverman that ever slid a bunch of horses across the Missouri by the dark of the moon. It's the Injun in him. That's a likely lookin' boy you got. Small, meebby. But he'll do to take along. I know what it is to be undersized. The kickin' around a runt has to take makes him or it breaks him. And if it makes him, then he's a mighty man. He'll be a better man than Hugh Farnsworth ever was, or ever could have been. Take a good look at that pair of young 'uns, Farnsworth. Take a long, good look. And mark this down in your renegade book. If ever there comes a time when this river crossin' gits bad, I'm sendin' that son of mine, Tom, down the one-way trail away from here. And that boy of yours goes with Tom Blue. And I'll kill you, Farnsworth, like I'd kill a mad dog, if you lift a hand to stop them boys from pullin' out. Drink on that, Johnny Bull, or we'll tangle here an' now."

Hugh Farnsworth looked hard and long into the glittering green eyes of Buckskin Blue. Then he reached down and lifted his wicker-covered demijohn from the ground, pulled the cork with his teeth and spat it out. He lifted the demijohn and Buck Blue lifted his brown jug and Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue drank their first drink together.

Jug and demijohn were never corked until the contents had been drunk. The two men squatted there on the bank of the Missouri and drank—drink for drink—until sundown and moonrise and on through the July Montana night. They drank and smoked and talked. And when the sun rose over the ragged skyline of the Montana badlands, Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue stripped down to

their belts and fought—without rules and no holds barred. Like two savage, brute beasts. Had there been men to witness and carry away the story of that fight it would have become a saga to be told and retold and sung wherever hard men gather by the light of campfires or in frontier saloons or log cabin bunkhouses where tales of fabulous deeds are recounted.

But there were only two boys to watch. Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue. They stayed hidden back in the brush and squatted there, tense, staring, wordless, while in their young hearts crept a growing and lasting respect and mighty admiration for the fighting prowess of the two fathers they had solemnly sworn to hate and some day to punish and in the end to desert.

Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue fought. They stood flat-footed and toe to toe and slugged. Mighty sledge-hammer blows thudded suddenly against sweat-drenched hide and solid meat and tough bone. The sweat was crimson with the flow of their blood. Winded, their labored breathing sobs racked their heaving chests. Then they stumbled into a grappling clinch and stood there, legs braced, straining and twisting and blinded by the sweat and blood that filled their battered eyes. Then they went down with a heavy crash, neither man fully conscious, and both of them too exhausted to deal punishment.

They were locked like that for a while, and neither man relaxed or let go, using the last of their strength to freeze the holds they held on one another. Then they rolled over and over slow and sluggish, their weary arms and legs gripped in wrestlers' holds, and neither man let go the fraction of an inch.

They rolled into the shallow water at the edge of the sandbar and slobbered their sodden heads in it and filled their gaping dry mouths, swallowing it in big gulps, spitting it out, still locked together in a tangle of weary muscle and bruised bone.

The cold water revived them, and the strength that had ebbed out of them with utter exhaustion now flowed back into their tough bodies. Buck Blue filled his red-whiskered mouth with river water and spewed it into Hugh Farnsworth's eyes, and the big raw-boned Britisher grabbed the sodden red mane of the squawman and shoved Buckskin Blue's head under water. Buck Blue fought free and his teeth sank into Hugh Farnsworth's shoulder.

They thrashed around in the shallow water and into water that was deeper and for a while they fought savagely to drown one another, and almost succeeded. Waterlogged and choked and gasping for breath they fell apart in the deeper water and swam and lunged and staggered and finally crawled on all fours like waterlogged animals through

the shallow water and onto the sandbar. Then without a spoken word or signal of mutual agreement, they each headed for their forty-rod whiskey—Buckskin Blue for his brown jug with the rawhide wrist loop tied in the jug handle, Hugh Farnsworth for his wicker-covered demijohn. They sat soddenly on the sandbar and gulped down the potent raw whiskey.

BOTH men were horribly battered and there was no way of knowing which of them was beaten. Not once had either of them given an outcry or groan of pain. The prodigious amount of rotgut booze each man had drunk had tended to deaden pain without slowing fighting ability. They were unlike in stature, Farnsworth tall and raw-boned and with longer legs and longer arm reach, while Buckskin Blue was compact and solid and swifter. When he came in, crouched, head sunk between his powerful shoulders, nothing could stop him. On dry land or in water, they had been evenly matched. No loser. No winner. Waterlogged, battered, the two men sized one another up through blood-shot eyes that had been pounded to discolored puffiness. The battle had been a draw. Each of them knew that. Only death would claim defeat for either man if ever again they fought.

Neither Hugh Farnsworth nor Buckskin Blue could have told you why they had fought. Rivalry, rather than actual enmity, had possibly motivated the enmity they had each fostered throughout the years during which they had known one another only by reputation. If finger could have been laid on the actual cause for this battle they had fought and finished without victory, the finger would point to one word—supremacy. There can be only one king to rule a kingdom, one ruler of any domain, regardless of its size. Buckskin Blue, squawman, claimed this strip along both sides of the swift Missouri River in Montana, for his own. Hugh Farnsworth, hunted and driven down from the Cypress Hills in Canada, had invaded the Hell Creek Ranch and taken claim away from Buck Blue. And so they had fought.

In regard to the Johnson boys, if a man rode the outlaw trail and lived up to the unwritten laws of their outlaw clan, if he did not violate the steel-clad code of those lawless riders of the dim trails, then he was one of the Johnson boys. There at Buckskin Blue's crossing on the Missouri River, any of the Johnson boys found a hearty welcome, with grub, whiskey, and cartridges for his outlaw guns, and a blind post office where he could leave word for his own kind or pick up a message from other Johnson boys.

Hugh Farnsworth had, somewhere along his renegade back trail, in some manner, by acci-

dent or cold-blooded intent, violated the unwritten laws, broken the code of the Johnson boys, and had been declared an outsider. Distrusted, despised and hated, outlawed by the outlaw tribe, when he moved in here at the Hell Creek Ranch, he had had to fight and lick Buckskin Blue in order to remain. For that reason Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue had fought—without victory to either man.

It was a stalemate. Deadlock. No victory for either man, yet no defeat. Yet something had happened to them and neither man could put a name to it. Somewhere during that long battle their hatred had fought itself out, and in its stead had come a mutual respect for the other man.

The blood of battle had washed away the offending stench of Buck Blue's buckskins. And by the same token it had cleansed the name of Hugh Farnsworth of its unwritten crime against the code of the Johnson boys.

Neither Hugh Farnsworth nor Buckskin Blue had a name for it. They eyed one another and their grins were battered so that their teeth bared from between smashed lips. They swapped jug and demijohn, and drank. It was Rocky Point forty-rod rotgut booze from the same barrel, a strong man's drink.

"We'll be one hell of a tough pair to beat, Hugh." Buckskin Blue broke the silence that had lasted throughout that long battle.

"Right you are, Buck."

"You had a deal in mind. . . ."

"One hell of a deal." Hugh Farnsworth's battered grin twisted. "There's only one drawback to it—it's honest."

"Honest." Buck Blue scowled, mulling over the word, chewing it and swallowing it and waiting for the taste of it to fill him.

"Honest." Hugh Farnsworth repeated the word carefully.

"It's damned late in the game," said Buck Blue finally, "for men like me and you to git religion."

"Trust still to life," quoted Hugh Farnsworth, "the day is not yet old."

"Uh?"

"Chap named Masefield wrote it. Translated it might mean that we'll get away with it. A damned slim chance. A thousand to one they'll never believe us. Neither the Johnson boys nor the Montana Vigilante Law."

"A rough josh," said Buckskin Blue, "to play on the Johnson boys."

"The joke will be on us," smiled the big Britisher, "when we hang by Vigilante rope from a tree limb."

"What give you the idee, anyhow?" asked Buck Blue. "What's in it for men like you and me?"

"The chances are," said Hugh Farnsworth, "that there'll be nothing but bitter disappoint-

ment in it for you and me. Death in the end. Either the Johnson boys will shoot us or we'll be hanged by the Vigilantes for our past crimes. But for a pair of beardless kids named Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue, it might mean something different."

"Meanin'?"

"This Hell Creek Ranch—your place across the river. The badlands range and the range beyond the badlands on both sides. Hay land on both river bottoms. Winter and summer range to run cattle. It could be built up into a big, paying cow outfit. A man don't need to steal to make a fortune in the cattle business in Montana. Only fools steal when honesty pays bigger and more lasting profit. The Vigilante rope is the only pay-off for the Johnson boys."

"That wasn't the deal you had in mind when you showed up here."

"No. Quite the contrary. I intended forcing you into a partnership of high-handed crime. Road agent work. Stagecoach and train hold-ups. Bank robbing. High-grade larceny. I'd force you into partnership or kill you, and claim both sides of the river crossing. It was you who changed the whole scheme of things when you forced me to drink to the future of Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue."

"Well I'll be damned."

"We'll both be damned," grinned Hugh Farnsworth, and lifted the jug.

SENTIMENT was a thing that men like Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue would go almost any lengths to keep deeply hidden inside their hearts. They were fearful now of letting it crop out. Farnsworth had the feeling he'd revealed a soft and vulnerable spot for an enemy's weapon. Buck Blue, recalling something of his own speech in behalf of their two sons, had much the same uneasy notion. They drank now to cover up and drown whatever akin to weakness they had revealed. Now they settled down to serious whiskey drinking.

"About this deal we just made, Johnny Bull. It calls for a lot of likker to sorta float it."

"Then it's a deal, squawman?"

"Your damned right it's a deal."

Buckskin Blue lifted his voice to a loud bellow.

"Tom! Where in hell you hid out, you young half-breed scalawag? Fork a pony an' git on down to Rocky Point Crossin'. Take young Pete along. Fetch me'n my pardner Hugh Farnsworth back all the rotgut forty-rod likker you kin carry a-horseback."

Behind the brush, Tom Blue poked Pete Farnsworth in the ribs. Both boys were excited, tense. They had watched everything. Overheard every word. They were excited and stirred up and not a little bewildered.

They came out from behind the brush, not daring to grin.

"Fetch me my bullwhip." Buck Blue scowled at his tall half-breed son.

Tom got the hand-braided, rawhide bullwhip from the rowboat and gave it to his father. Pete knew that that was the whip that had scarred the lean brown back of Tom Blue.

Buckskin Blue slid a wooden-handled skinning knife from its sheath on his cartridge belt. Deliberately, his puffed, slitted green eyes shining, the squawman slashed the bullwhip into shreds.

Tom Blue stood there in his faded blue shirt and overalls and battered old black Stetson hat. Tears welled in his smoke-gray eyes. All the hatred for his tough, red-bearded father melted in those tears.

"Now git!" Buck Blue's voice was a husky growl. "Git goin'. Fetch back that Rocky Point likker before our crocks run dry."

Hugh Farnsworth gripped Pete's shoulder. It was a strong, hard grip. The big Britisher had no words to go with it. But Pete understood and there was a hard aching lump in his throat. He knew inside his young heart that never again would Hugh Farnsworth lash him with his tongue as Buck Blue had quirted his son Tom with the rawhide bullwhip.

The two boys rode away together. For a mile or more they shared a strange silence. It was Tom Blue who finally broke that silence.

"It looks to me, Pete, like Buck Blue an' Hugh Farnsworth took away our medicine. Makes our medicine awful weak. Theirs is strong medicine—war medicine, Pete."

"We can't run away now, Tom."

"Gosh, no. If we live to be older'n the hills, we'll never see two men fight like that. They tore up the ground. Was you scared, Pete?"

"Scared enough to die in my boots."

"Me, too. I ain't bawled since my ma died from smallpox when I was twelve, but I had to grit my teeth to keep from bustin' out bawlin' when Buck Blue cut up his bullwhip."

Pete nodded. "Hugh Farnsworth won't cuss me out, ever again, Tom. I know that. I wanted to bawl, too."

They talked a lot as they rode along the trail to Rocky Point Crossing. Some of it was man-talk. But the most of it had a lot of kid-stuff mixed into it and Tom Blue's way of talking had a lot of what Pete called Injun in it. Most of Tom Blue's ideas and beliefs had been learned at the lodge of his mother's Sioux father whose name was Eyes in the Sky. Eyes in the Sky was a hundred years old and a medicine man. Tom took the Sioux stories and legends, and put them in his own words and fixed up their meaning according to his own whim. He promised to

teach Pete the Sioux language and sign talk and the meaning of the countless little and big things that went into the making of the special peculiar code of life according to the lights of young Tom Blue. Seventeen-year-old Tom Blue might have been the hundred-year-old Eyes in the Sky talking to a very young disciple who was eager to learn the 'why' of many things.

There was a cleanness to the belief and philosophy of young Tom Blue that was as fresh and flawless and clean as a rain-washed blue sky.

Talking, they rode along together to the log cabin saloon at the Rocky Point Crossing. They didn't see the saddled horses that were hidden in the brush a hundred yards behind the log cabin saloon. They did not know they were being watched until they rode up to the saloon. Then, a dozen or more heavily-armed men came out of the saloon and surrounded their horses and yanked them out of their saddles and hauled them into the saloon.

"The Injun-lookin' kid is Buck Blue's half-breed whelp. The tow-headed button is Hugh Farnsworth's kid. Hogtie the pair of coyote whelps. We can't hang a couple of bald-faced kids. Though General Crook had the right idee about bad Injuns when he said kill the nits along with the lice."

Chapter III

HANGROPE JUSTICE AT HORSETHIEF CROSSING

THEY called themselves the Vigilantes and there were a dozen or sixteen or twenty of them. Grim-jawed, hard-eyed cattlemen and cowhands, none of them made any effort at disguise. They had no need for concealing their identities. They were the Vigilante Law.

Pete Farnsworth knew some of these men by sight. Tom Blue seemed to know them all by sight and by name and by the brands they owned or worked for.

"Tuck in your shirt-tail, Pete," whispered Tom Blue, "and keep your trap shut. We're licked before we start."

The two boys were dragged and shoved into the log cabin saloon. There was no sign of the bearded Tex Alvord who ran the saloon and ferryboat here at Rocky Point Crossing. Pete and Tom were tied hand and foot and left there. It was getting dark outside when the heavily-armed Vigilantes mounted their horses and rode off into the thickening black shadows of night.

It was moonrise when the slow spoken Tex showed up and loosened the ropes that tied the two boys.

"Them fellers told me they'd skin the hide off me if I turned you two young outlaws free before sunrise tomorrow. I ain't settin' you

free. Just easin' these hoggin' strings that's cuttin' off the circulation. If you work loose, I can't help it." Tex filled himself a jug and went off down the river to bait his catfish trotline.

Pete and Tom forked their horses and rode back along the trail. They separated at Tom Blue's suggestion so that if the Vigilantes had the trail set with gun-traps they wouldn't get both boys at the same time.

But the trail back to the Hell Creek Ranch had been left unguarded. Pete and Tom, riding cautiously a couple of hundred yards apart, the halfbreed boy in the lead, heard the sound of shooting when they got within a mile of the ranch. Then the shooting stopped. Tom Blue signaled for Pete to join him and Tom's brown face looked a little white in the moonlight.

"We got to short-cut them Vigilantes, Pete, somehow. Our war medicine better be awful strong. You scared, Pete?"

"I guess I'm scared all right, Tom."

"But you won't rabbit on me."

"No, Tom, I won't rabbit."

Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth had saddle carbines. They cached their horses in the brush and went on afoot with their guns. They heard voices of men talking. A big bonfire showed through the willows and choke-cherry and service-berry brush, the big blaze lighting up the leafy branches of giant old cottonwoods. When the two boys crept closer they saw Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue. The two men were sitting on saddled horses, their hands tied behind their backs, the Vigilante hangman's nooses around their necks and the ropes thrown over the cottonwood limb. Both men were blood-spattered, and still marked and bruised by their epic battle. They had been caught off guard and taken without too much of a gun battle. Now they wore their hangman nooses with typical bravado.

"... and just when we'd got religion," rumbled the deep voice of Buck Blue.

"So much," smiled Hugh Farnsworth twistedly, "for the plans of mice and men and renegades. I told you they wouldn't believe us."

"But you ain't told 'em what we had in mind, Farnsworth. All them fancy, double-barreled words you used on me. Fire 'em at these Vigilante gents fer a broadside. Aim the speech at Circle Dot Fogarty fer a gut-shot. He's the eagle chief of this two-bit Vigilante war party."

Circle Dot Fogarty was a big florid man with graying, wiry black hair and a pair of hard, steel-gray eyes set deep under craggy black brows. He was the chosen leader of the Vigilantes and owner of the big Circle Dot outfit. He rode up now on a big, sweat-marked

brown gelding that wore his Circle Dot brand on the left shoulder, and into the revealing glow of the firelight.

"You was sighted, Farnsworth," Circle Dot Fogarty had a well-controlled, quiet voice, "you and that tow-headed son of yours, drivin' a bunch of stolen horses down through the badlands of the Hell Crick Ranch. You talked your way out at the Vigilante trial that hung three of your renegade pardners to a cottonwood tree back on Seven Mile Crick. I recollect a solemn promise you gave that you was done with horse stealin' and cattle rustlin' and road agent holdups. Even if we can't locate the stolen horses, we know you done it again."

Buckskin Blue looked at Hugh Farnsworth and spat through battered lips.

"So that's what happened to you when these Vigilantes hung three of the Johnson boys." Buck Blue's voice was heavy with contempt now.

"That's what happened," said Hugo Farnsworth. "I talked my way out."

Hugh Farnsworth was wondering what had happened to the stolen horses he and his son Pete had brought here.

BUCK BLUE could have enlightened him. Buck Blue had told his half-breed son Tom to slide those stolen horses into the river last night and cross 'em while he, Buck Blue, got the big Johnny Bull dead drunk. Now the squawman was wishing Tom Blue hadn't shoved the stolen horses across the Missouri River to scatter out unclaimed in the badlands. The Vigilantes now lacked the actual evidence against Hugh Farnsworth to hang him for a horse thief. Because Hugh Farnsworth had proved a traitor to the Johnson boys, Buckskin Blue was discarding their newly-formed, whiskey-baptized partnership in his hatred for the big Britisher who had quit three of the Johnson boys in a tight.

"We don't need them stolen horses, Fogarty," spoke up one of the Vigilante lieutenants who had drunk too much Rocky Point rotgut whiskey, "to hang Farnsworth. We got his back record. And we got plenty mated against Buckskin Blue. Quirt their two horses out from under the seats of their britches, boys, and we'll watch them two renegades prance the rope dance." The speaker was Burt Burnell of the Broken B outfit.

Tom Blue had given Pete a leg-up into the lower branches of a big cottonwood just beyond the glow of the firelight. Pete had reached down his gun barrel to Tom, had pulled the half-breed boy up into the leafy branches. Both of them had climbed up into the black concealment of the tree. Now Tom Blue's voice cut through the night like a sharp knife through black lard.

"I got my sights lined on Circle Dot Fo-

garty. My pardner's got Burt Burnell in his gun sights. We can't miss if we pull the trigger. Turn Hugh Farnsworth an' Buckskin Blue loose and give 'em a long head-start. You better be quick about it. Because me'n my pardner Pete are just spooked enough to shoot. Turn 'em loose!" Tom Blue's voice had a sharp edge.

Circle Dot Fogarty stiffened in his saddle. His long arm flung out in a sweeping gesture. "String 'em up, boys!" His voice was level-toned.

The saddle gun gripped in Tom Blue's hands, its stock against his lean shoulder, spat a streak of fire. Circle Dot Fogarty was jerked sideways in his saddle by the impact of the leaden slug.

Burt Burnell, lean, wiry, long-boned, hawk-beaked, his black hair sleek and his drooping mustache carefully curled, sobered up fast. His dark skin whitened and his pale amber yellow eyes glinted redly in the firelight.

"Turn the prisoners loose!" His voice was saw-edged. "Turn 'em loose before we're murdered! His voice shrilled a little. "Don't shoot, you young devils!" he shouted through the gun echoes.

There was a long, razor-edged knife in Burt Burnell's hand and he did not wait. He spurred his horse in between the horses forked by the two prisoners and in two swift, long-armed moves Burt Burnell, owner of the Broken B outfit, stood high in his stirrups and slashed apart the two ropes just above the hangman's knots he had himself fashioned. Then he slashed the hogging strings that tied the hands of Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue. The two prisoners were free.

Buck Blue flexed his freed hands and reached for his bridle reins. His teeth bared between his red-whiskered lips. His moccasin heels kicked his horse into motion.

Hugh Farnsworth reached up and freed the hangman's knot. He flung the severed noose into the face of Burt Burnell.

"You white-livered coward." Hugh Farnsworth rode slowly over to where Circle Dot Fogarty sagged in his saddle, gripping the saddle horn.

"I have a slight working knowledge of surgery, Fogarty. I'm putting it at your disposal. Send your Vigilantes on their way. I'll patch you up before I follow my squawman pardner down the long trail out of Montana Territory. But act quickly, man. You're bleeding a lot."

Fogarty nodded. "Hit the trail, men. Go back to your outfits. Burt Burnell is already on his way."

Then Fogarty collapsed across his saddle horn and Hugh Farnsworth caught his sagging bulk, lowered the wounded man gently, and carried him into the log cabin, where he

laid him down there on a tarp covered bed.

The wound was not too serious. The slug had bored a clean hole through the shoulder muscle without breaking the bone. It was a clean flesh wound and it bled profusely. But Hugh Farnsworth had the wound cleansed and dressed and bandaged in a short time. Tom Blue and young Pete helped, and Buckskin Blue grinned, watching.

After Fogarty had been patched up, Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue shook hands with their two sons. Then the two renegades rode away into the night and were gone in the badlands.

PETE FARNSWORTH never learned to swim. He tried so many times that Tom Blue finally told him that unless Pete quit floundering around and splashing, that he, Tom, would throw Pete back in for the last time and ride away from their PT outfit.

"I'm scared of the river, Tom," Pete tried to explain it. "I got to lick that fear of swimmin' water."

At first, Tom tried every way he could think of to teach Pete how to get over that fear of the river. Time after time. Pete paddled a few strokes. Then panic gripped him and his arms flailed the water and he gasped and choked. His own weight dragged him under. Tom Blue dove down and hauled Pete out. Pete Farnsworth shook like he had ague and his eyes were glazed with stark terror. Tom felt sick inside just watching Pete try to fight down the terror of near-drowning.

"You'll have to quit tryin', Pete. I can't take no more of it."

"I'm a rank coward, Tom."

"Coward, hell!"

It was something that Tom Blue's Injun medicine could not cure. Even the strong medicine of old Eyes in the Sky, who was a hundred years old and a medicine man, had no potency. The two boys came away from the Sioux camp on the reservation sadly disappointed. Tom and the medicine of Eyes in the Sky had nearly drowned Pete Farnsworth in Lodge Pole Creek. And it wasn't deep enough to wet a man's saddle skirts.

"You just sink like a rock, Pete. Like you was weighted down."

The hell of it was that the PT outfit straddled the Missouri River. There wasn't a day that did not call for some kind of river work. Tom wasn't always there to do the job that had to be done in the river, so Pete would just wait till Tom got back.

Pete Farnsworth's fear of water was a terrible phobia. He was afraid to swim a horse across, even when it was one of Tom Blue's river horses that would take a rider across as if he were on a ferryboat.

"Leave the bridle reins alone, Pete," Tom

told him. "That horse will take you acrost and turn around and fetch you back without dampening the seat of your britches."

Pete got panicky out in the middle of the swift channel and grabbed the bridle reins and hauled the horse over backwards, and Tom had a time saving Pete and the horse because Pete had a death grip on the bridle reins and Tom couldn't break the drowning clutch. He had to cut the throatlatch and yank the headstall off the lunging horse and haul Pete clear of the lunging, pawing, terrified horse.

Pete Farnsworth at last gave up trying to learn how to swim. The best he could do was learn to row a boat. Even when he rowed across the river in the skiff he would get panicked and by the time he'd rowed across to the far bank he would be drenched with cold sweat and blowing hard, with every muscle aching from the wild feverish way he handled the oars.

"You better wait till winter comes and the river freezes over, Pete, to cross over to the other side. Don't tell me you're scared of ice."

Tom Blue made a josh out of it. And so did Pete. As the weeks and months lengthened into a year and the PT outfit that straddled the river grew into a sizeable spread, the cow country made a by-word out of it.

"As scared," they would label some fear, "as Pete Farnsworth is scared of the Missouri River."

Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth did better than all right for a pair of bald-faced kids starting in the cow business. But they owed everything they got in the beginning to Circle Dot Fogarty.

Tom Blue had made the deal with the big cowman, right after Hugh Farnsworth had patched up the bullet rip made by Tom Blue's gun.

"I could have shot to kill," Tom Blue said. "But I shot to cripple you. And Hugh Farnsworth kept you from bleedin' to death. So in that case your life belongs to me. I got first claim on it till you save my life. Then that'll make us even. I read it in a book so it's got to be the truth. I guess you better take an oath on it, mister."

Circle Dot Fogarty said that was right. Hugh Farnsworth wiped a grin off his face as he and Circle Dot Fogarty looked at one another.

So Tom Blue claimed ownership to the life of Circle Dot Fogarty—as he claimed the life of Pete Farnsworth.

Circle Dot Fogarty called a meeting of the Vigilantes when his bullet wound healed.

"Young Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth are goin' to stay located there on the Missouri River. They'll register their PT brand with the Stockmen's Association. They'll run an

honest outfit. And I'll see to it that those two kids are let alone."

Circle Dot Fogarty talked down all arguments against the two boys. In the end the Vigilantes were, for the most part, agreed to give Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue a chance to make good.

Burt Burnell was the only man who was bitterly and profanely opposed to the idea. And he never weakened or backed down in his attitude.

"General Crook had the right idea when he went after Injuns. If you expect to get rid of the lice, you've got to kill the nits. That pair of kids are dangerous like the two renegades that sired 'em. Mark my word, men, Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue will whittle on your cattle and horses. They'll build up their herd with rustled cattle. They'll use their river ranches for an outlaw way-station. That pair of tough kids ain't too young to hang. If they're old enough to handle a cow outfit, they're old enough to stretch rope."

BURT BURNELL was no older than twenty-four or five himself, but he was man enough to ramrod the Broken B outfit left him by his father, who had been killed by unidentified cattle rustlers. Young and tall and handsome enough in a lean-jawed, hawk-beaked way, Burt Burnell knew how to hate, how to carry a long grudge, and in the end, how to pay off that hard grudge.

Circle Dot Fogarty grinned flatly. "I recollect you cuttin' a couple of Vigilante ropes, Burt."

That stopped Burt Burnell. Circle Dot Fogarty and the other cattlemen who belonged to the Vigilantes had witnessed Burt Burnell's fear that night. It was something the handsome, swaggering young cowman had to live down and that was no easy chore in the cow country where every man is judged by hard standards and according to the lights of men who value bravery more than wealth or name.

Burt Burnell's hatred for Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue was a slow poison. If he had been a man like Fogarty he would have taken his hatred out into the open and perhaps shot it out with the two boys or been shot down in the attempt. But that was not Burt Burnell's way. He lacked the guts.

"The majority rules," Burt Burnell told Circle Dot Fogarty and the Vigilantes. "I'll abide by it. But don't try to make me believe it. I hate the guts of that pair of renegade whelps. If ever they bother my Broken B cattle or horses, I'll cut those young coyote whelps down. They better stay off my Broken B range."

Burt Burnell made his talk to Circle Dot Fogarty and the Vigilantes. He told it like

that to old Tex Alvord at Rocky Point Crossing. It was whiskey-talk and Burt Burnell had the backing of some of his tough Broken B cowhands when he made it.

Old Tex Alvord, soft spoken, slow moving, a friend to any man who would let him be a friend, passed it along to Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth for what it was worth.

"That range dude, Burt Burnell, it tellin' it scary, boys. You better know what he's sayin'."

Tom Blue's quick warning look silenced anything Pete Farnsworth might have said by way of returning the fight talk.

"Burt Burnell," Tom Blue passed it off with a grin, "will git over it. Me'n Pete is goin' to be too busy to bother the Broken B livestock. Anyhow, Tex, the PT is an honest outfit. Me'n my pardner Pete would be much obliged if you'd send that word to the Johnson boys."

Tex Alvord said the rustling of the leaves down along the outlaw trail had already taken care of that.

"Buck Blue," said Tex Alvord, "an' Hugh Farnsworth stopped by here to pick up a crock to take along. They told me the yarn. Any time you two buttons got ary word to send to Hugh Farnsworth an' Buck Blue, leave it with me here at Rocky Point Crossin' and I'll see they git the news."

Old Tex Alvord was a man who was left alone by the Vigilantes. Tex owned no iron. When he needed meat and was tired of venison or antelope or catfish, Tex Alvord would butcher a beef. It mattered not at all what brand was on the beef critter. He sank the hide in the river and hung the beef quarters in his meat house. And that was that.

Cowmen like Circle Dot Fogarty took it for a josh. Tex Alvord never sold any of the meat. He ate it, or fed it to any and all men who stopped at Rocky Point Crossing long enough to get the wrinkles out of their belly. Even Burt Burnell pretended to enjoy the joke on his Broken B iron.

Tex Alvord was in a position to do the cattlemen around that part of the cow country an occasional favor. If some winter line camp was thrown short-handed, Tex Alvord would pitch in without being asked. He'd rawhide back in the badlands to fetch in weak cattle or he'd chop open the water holes in the winter's deep ice or shovel hay into cattle that needed feeding. He never asked or expected a dollar in payment.

"I'll eat it up in beef," Tex would say.

Easy-spoken Tex Alvord helped out Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue when the two boys were getting started in their cattle business.

"Circle Dot Fogarty," Tex Alvord told the boys, "told me to kinda keep an eye on

you. See that you got along without fightin'."

So now and then Tex Alvord would show up there at their Hell Creek Ranch where both boys were batching. He'd fetch a quarter of beef or perhaps a sack of grub like sugar and baking powder or coffee from his trading post store at Rocky Point Crossing and stay a day or two, helping them out with their haying or calf-branding.

Sometimes he fetched along a slim girl with unruly black hair and dark eyes and a small nose and red-lipped mouth and stubborn little chin: Circle Dot Fogarty's fifteen-year-old daughter, Bridget.

"She's run off again," old Tex would chuckle. "I got to take her back to the Circle Dot ranch."

Bridget Fogarty had been running away from the Circle Dot home ranch since she was old enough to ride the fat little white pony Tex Alvord had given her on her sixth birthday. The pony had been foaled and raised at Rocky Point Crossing and all the youngster had to do was give Snowflake his head and he'd fetch her straight to Rocky Point Crossing.

THE FIRST time little Bridget Fogarty took a notion to run off, Circle Dot Fogarty and every cowpuncher from his outfit and neighboring cow outfits formed a big search party that rode night and day till Tex Alvord sent word to Circle Dot Fogarty that the little girl was safe.

"The young 'un," Tex Alvord sent word to the missing child's father and mother, "is catfishin'. I'll fetch her home when she's ready to go back."

Tom Blue had known Bridget Fogarty since she was a little thing in pigtails. She eyed the half-breed boy with frank adoration. It was hero worship and it pleased young Tom Blue, but he covered his pleased vanity with a sort of careless tolerance.

"That darned fool kid," Tom Blue was all of nine or ten years old, "follers a man around like a hound pup, always underfoot. Why don't you git for home where you belong?"

"When we grow up and get married, Tom, you won't think I'm underfoot. I'll have to cook your grub and wash and mend your clothes—"

"Gosh sakes. Married. When I'm old enough to think about gettin' married I'll buy me a squaw. White girls are shore silly. I'm part Injun. I'll be a squawman like Buckskin Blue."

But when Tex Alvord showed up with the fifteen-year-old girl in faded blue cotton shirt and patched overalls and wearing shopmade boots and a Stetson hat pulled down on her curly black head, it was the first time Pete Farnsworth had ever seen Bridget Fogarty.

Nobody had ever told Pete that Circle Dot Fogarty had a daughter.

"How, Injun!" she called out to Tom Blue. "Tell me about how the Vigilantes darned near hung Buck Blue. Is that tow-head kid the Pete Farnsworth Circle Dot talks about?"

"You're gettin' too old," scowled Tom Blue, "to be runnin' off. Looks like you'd commence sometime to outgrow it."

"I came along with Tex, to pick up fifty head of stolen horses you promised Circle Dot Fogarty. Don't be so darned grouchy. Quit showin' your Injun, Tomahawk."

"When she wants to get a rise outa me," Tom Blue told Pete Farnsworth, "she calls me Tommyhawk. She's Circle Dot Fogarty's daughter, Bridget. She wants to be cattle queen of Montana when she should be home helpin' her ma with the dishes. . . ."

Tom Blue ignored her and spoke to Tex. "I got them horses in the Buck Blue pasture across the river, Tex. Circle Dot Fogarty said he'd send his horse wrangler down after 'em and me'n Pete'll help him outa the badlands and on to the Circle Dot horse camp. The Vigilantes kin claim 'em there."

"I'm the horse wrangler," Bridget was looking at Pete Farnsworth, and Pete was red-eared and embarrassed by the open, dark-eyed appraisal of the girl who sat her horse like an old cowhand. "And since it's so darned much bother, Injun, I'll take Pete across the river with me. While you talk Injun to Tex. Come along, Pete."

The Missouri River was low at that time of the year and there wasn't more than perhaps a hundred feet of swimming water out in the channel. The horse Pete was forking was one of Buck Blue's string and a water-dog when it came to swimming. The big, flax-maned gelding could cross the river with a kid of Pete's light weight without wetting the saddle skirts.

"Go along with her, Pete." There was a sharpness to Tom Blue's voice. The look in his smoke-gray eyes was hard.

Pete saw the look and heard the taunting challenge in the half-breed boy's voice. He was puzzled, then nettled. He fought back his stark fear of the Missouri River. He reined the big gelding and headed for the water's edge. Bridget gave Tom Blue a red-lipped smile and a toss of her curly black head. She rode up alongside Pete so close that their stirrups scraped, and held out her hand across her saddle horn.

"I'm Bridget Fogarty, Pete. You call me Biddy. Circle Dot told me a lot about you. I'll race you across the river."

She reached out and gripped Pete's clumsy hand, then headed for the river. She had ridden out a ways ahead of him when Pete spurred his big horse into the river and

through the shallow water. Hock deep. Belly deep. Cold sweat beaded Pete's face. The color drained from his tanned skin to leave it a sickly, pale yellow color and his sky-blue eyes glazed with stark fear.

Bridget Fogarty had taken a head start and she and her horse were out in the swift channel and into swimming water before Pete got his stirrups wet. She was as much at home in the river as was Tom Blue and she had pulled her feet out of the stirrups and bent her legs back to keep her boots clear of the water. She was singing Buckskin Blue's song about the Johnson boys:

"Oh, the Johnson boys they built a mill,
They built it on the side of a hill.
Oh, they worked and worked all night and day
But they couldn't make the darned mill
pay!"

She was across the deep channel and her Circle Dot sorrel gelding was lunging into shallower water when she looked back, laughing, across her shoulder. The song died and the laughter in it froze.

Pete Farnsworth had dropped his knotted bridle reins and was gripping the saddle horn with both hands. The look of fear was stamped on his face and showed in his eyes. He hung onto the saddle horn while the horrible fear crawled like a slimy cold snake through his guts and knotted the inside of his belly. His teeth gritted as he choked back the sobbing yelp of stark terror that welled up inside him. He cringed in his saddle and his fear-glazed eyes were blind to the sight of everything but the swift water all around him.

He was like that when the big gelding lunged out of swimming water and splashed through shallow water and onto the long wide sandbar.

The girl sat her dripping horse. Her red lips were twisted and the laughter gone out of her dark hazel eyes. She eyed Pete Farnsworth with an unpleasant mixture of puzzlement and contempt.

Pete's fear-glazed eyes had not yet focused to see the girl plainly when, without a word, she reined her horse and rode away from him as if he were something that made her a little nauseated.

PETE FARNSWORTH was left alone there on the sandbar. He was cringing and shivering and could not get control of himself. He was soaked to the waistband of his Levi overalls from the river water, but it was cold clammy fear-sweat that beaded his yellowish face.

Then Pete Farnsworth heard the voice of Tom Blue come across the river and it shocked him into reality.

"Go along, Pete. Help Biddy Fogarty fetch

over them horses Hugh Farnsworth stole when he begged off at the hangin' of three of the Johnson boys. . . ."

Pete Farnsworth heard Tom Blue. Sick inside and terrified as he was, Pete could not help recognize the hatred the half-breed boy put into his voice. Pete did not understand why.

But grizzled Tex Alvord from Rocky Point Crossing understood and a hardness crept into his slow, lazy drawl.

"You shore got some of Buck Blue's blood in you, son. I hate to watch it crop out. Hugh Farnsworth's kid Pete is a better man right now than you'll ever be. Now hit that river and fetch over them horses. Or I'll double a rope and lay it acrost your half-breed back."

Swift anger blazed like sparks through the dark gray smoke of Tom Blue's eyes. But the puckered eyes of grizzled Tex Alvord stared the half-breed boy down.

"Little Bridget Fogarty," Tex Alvord was a kindly man who hated to hurt anybody or any animal, "is a white girl. You're a Sioux squaw's half-breed son, Tom. Circle Dot Fogarty is a prideful man who would rather see his only daughter dead than married to a half-breed. It's the first time I suspected anything. So it's the first and only time I'll ever say a word about it. I've overlooked the fact you've growed up into a man, Tom Blue."

The look in Tom Blue's eyes was an ugly thing to see. And grizzled Tex Alvord hated to look into it. Tex Alvord from Rocky Point Crossing was a strange man, a man who lived alone and was sufficient unto himself. His back trail had been well covered—if there was anything on it that needed hiding. In many ways this half-breed son of Buckskin Blue was like his own son. Tom Blue's Sioux squaw mother had nursed Tex Alvord through the smallpox plague, and his tough hide was pitted by the scars that would forever remind him that an Indian woman had nursed him and taken him out of the black valley of death and given him his life. He had been barely strong enough in his recuperation to attend the funeral of the Sioux squaw who had died of the same dread smallpox from which her nursing had dragged Tex Alvord back to life.

Tom Blue, young half-breed, whose heart was more Sioux than white man's, stared at the grizzled Tex Alvord.

"Buck Blue," Tom's voice had a brittle sound, "is the only man on earth I'd ever let double a rope acrost my back. Don't try it, Tex, or I'll kill you."

Tom Blue rode his horse into the Missouri River and across it and the song of the Johnson boys came drifting back to Tex Alvord where he sat his horse, his leathery face as gray as the ashes of an old campfire.

" Because 'twas built by the Johnson

boys!" The song had a haunting melody.

When Tom Blue splashed ashore on the far side of the Missouri River, young Pete Farnsworth was gone. He had somehow picked up the slack in his bridle reins and Buck Blue's big gelding had taken his dazed young rider along the sandbar and through the red willows and where the wild roses bloomed and on into the badlands beyond. Young Pete Farnsworth was alone with his shame and his shaken sweaty fear when he found himself riding, he knew not where, through the broken badlands where the scrub pines grew. It might have been a mile or ten miles farther on when the sweat of fear dried and the color came back into his skin and the blind glaze was gone from eyes that were as blue as the Montana sky.

Pete Farnsworth, son of Hugh Farnsworth, would have ridden away then, taking all the bitter humiliation and shame that was in his young heart with him. Then and there.

But somewhere there dimly sounded the voice of Tom Blue, and the half-breed boy was singing the song about the Johnson boys. Pete Farnsworth remembered the solemn oath he had sworn, the blood-brother pledge he had made with Tom Blue, who had saved, and therefore claimed the life of Pete Farnsworth.

Young Pete Farnsworth heard the last dim echo of that song about the fabulous Johnson boys, and he reined his horse around and rode back.

But Tom Blue and Bridget Fogarty had already rounded up the horses Hugh Farnsworth had stolen and pledged back to Circle Dot Fogarty. The half-breed son of Buckskin Blue and the tomboy daughter of Circle Dot Fogarty had crossed the horses and were already on their way with them to the Circle Dot horse camp beyond the badlands.

Only the grizzled Tex Alvord was there on Buck's side of the Missouri River. Tex had Buck Blue's rowboat and had pulled up the trotline and taken off last night's catch of catfish from the trotline's hooks and let the trotline back into the water. Tex Alvord's eyes were puckered in his leathery skin and his voice was a lazy drawl.

"Better unsaddle and turn that flaxy horse loose, son. And put them danged catfish into that wet gunnysack. Cut this beef liver into little hunks and draw up the trotline an' bait them hooks while I row back acrost."

Chapter X

PARDNERS TO HELL AND BACK!

TEX ALVORD helped Pete with the evening chores. After supper the grizzled Tex and the beardless Pete sat on their hunkers in the gathering dusk and shared a long silence

that was helped along by the chuckling whisper of the river against the banks. They fished for catfish with long willow poles and a sagebrush smudge to drive off the mosquitoes. The catfish nibbled the bait off their hooks and Tex said it was just as well the fish got away with the bait because he and Pete wasn't fishing for grub but just to while away the evening until moonrise.

"I got a feelin' in my creaky bones, son," said Tex Alvord, "that somethin' is wrong. Somebody lied somewheres."

When Pete asked Tex Alvord what he meant, Tex said that he couldn't exactly find the defalgalty. On the surface it seemed to be all right. He said Biddy Fogarty hadn't run off from the Circle Dot home ranch or from the horse camp, either—any more than Circle Dot Fogarty had sent his tomboy daughter down to the Hell Crick Ranch to pick up that bunch of stolen horses.

"Fogarty wouldn't send his daughter to pick up them horses. Somebody put her up to it. For a josh, mebbly. But most mebbly it ain't ary kind of a comical josh. And it could be a laugh on somebody that won't stay alive long enough to listen to the laughin'. All I know is that little Biddy Fogarty showed up at Rocky Point Crossin' and said she was headed for the Hell Crick Ranch to pick up the stolen horses that's been held in pound till the worked brands and actual ownership of the horses kin be straightened out. You might shed some light on it, son, if you was to tell me what kind of a deal was made between Hugh Farnsworth and Circle Dot Fogarty."

Pete Farnsworth said that Hugh Farnsworth had left orders with Pete and Tom to gather the stolen horses and hold them in Buck Blue's horse pasture till the blotched brands peeled and haired over and the original brands could be read and the horses returned to their actual owners.

"I don't know where my father picked up those horses, Tex," said Pete. "Hugh Farnsworth had me farmed out to the livery barn owner at Chinook. I was gettin' my schoolin' on the side. My father showed up. He was in a hurry. He said the Vigilantes had picked him and three other horse thieves up. That they'd hung the other three and turned him loose and there was something about the worked brands on those horses that had him fooled and puzzled. And he told Circle Dot Fogarty, here in this cabin while he was makin' his deal with Fogarty, that if those stolen horses could be hid out and held till the fresh brands scabbed and peeled and haired, that the worked brands might hang one of Circle Dot Fogarty's holier-than-thou Vigilantes. What's wrong, Tex?"

Tex Alvord had thrown his fishing pole with its line and bullet sinker and whiskey-jug,

cork float into the Missouri River. Dropped it, rather than thrown it. He was on his feet. His leathery face with its week's stubble of graying beard was a grim mask in the moonlight.

"Wet a horse with his hide on and the brand shows up. Burt Burnell gambled away the Broken B outfit his old man left him. Like father, like son. Bob Burnell built up his Broken B outfit with a long rope and a runnin' iron and there ain't been a time when the Broken B was on the square. Buck Blue shot and killed Bob Burnell at my saloon at the Rocky Point Crossin' when Bob Burnell cheated Buck Blue outa Buck's half int'rest in the Broken B iron that was built by the Johnson boys. Now Burt Burnell has gambled his Broken B away, and taken to horse stealin' and road agent hold-ups. And Circle Dot Fogarty is the man that won the Broken B outfit in an all-night poker game at Rocky Point Crossin'. He tore up the bill of sale and told Burt Burnell to take back his Broken B on one condition. And that one condition was that Burt Burnell would stay plumb far away from Circle Dot Fogarty's daughter, Bridget. Little Biddy, like every other girl in the cow country, has the mistaken notion that the spur-jinglin' Burt Burnell is the best woman-ketch in the Montana cow country."

Tex Alvord was looking grim. His puckered blue eyes clouded.

"I'm scared, son," he told Pete Farnsworth, "that we're a day late and a dollar short. By now, Tom Blue is dead."

"Tom Blue . . . ?"

"Tom read the wet brand on them horses when they come ashore. Tom is almighty close-mouthed. He'd crawl through Hell's hot clinkers on his young half-breed belly and let the red clinkers burn him apart, for little Biddy Fogarty. Time's slipped on us, son. We'll be too late now. . . ."

Young Pete Farnsworth did not quite understand. Grizzled Tex Alvord had done his thinking aloud and had left out some of it. Tex Alvord gripped young Pete's shoulder with a gnarled hand.

They were saddling their horses when Bridget Fogarty rode up out of the moonlit night. Her face was chalky white and her faded blue shirt was stained with a widening dark spot across her left shoulder. Her horse was played out and she clung to the saddle horn.

"Tom Blue," Bridget Fogarty's bloodless lips spread in a twisted grimace, "claims he owns you, Pete. He's hollering for help. When it came to a bad tight, Tom Blue shivered and shook like a gun-shy bird dog. Burt Burnell shot a hole in Tom Blue's hand and that half-breed threw his gun away."

"Where was Circle Dot Fogarty?" There

was a hardness in old Tex Alvord's voice. "Circle Dot Fogarty," said Bridget, "rode into a Broken B gun-trap. I'm a darned fool, Tex."

Tex Alvord said sure she was a darned fool. That all women were. That was why he never married one. But little Biddy Fogarty didn't hear what Tex said. She had fallen sideways out of her saddle and into the grizzled riverman's arms. He carried her as he would carry a baby, into the cabin.

"If I don't git busy right away, son," Tex Alvord told Pete, "this young 'un will die. I still think little Biddy is worth savin'. I'm afraid, young Pete, you're on your own."

PETE FARNSWORTH told old Tex Alvord that even if Tom Blue did have a claim on his life, still he, Pete, was taking time to help Tex doctor the bullet rip in little Bridget Fogarty's shoulder. And he did. It wasn't a bad wound but it had bled a lot and it was painful. But Biddy gritter her teeth and tried to grin. She fainted only once and that was when Tex cauterized the wound to kill any blood poison. He used some carbolic and bluestone he found at the barn.

They got a disjointed story from the girl. She said it was Burt Burnell who had ribbed her into coming down here to get the bunch of stolen horses. Burt had ridden over to the Circle Dot horse camp. He said that he had just come from the Circle Dot ranch and that Fogarty had send word to his daughter to ride down after the horses. Burt Burnell had been foxy enough to make it sound casual. Fooled her completely.

"Burt wanted to come along," said Biddy, "but I gave him the slip. I thought I was smart. That he'd follow me and overtake me and we'd hold hands as we rode along. Burt's a good looking cowboy and every girl I know has tried to marry him. I know he's no good. That he's a drinker and a gambler and makes a fool out of every country girl who runs after him. But he's a good looking cowboy, and smarter than most men figure him."

"Or most wimmin'," said Tex grimly.

"That's plenty right, Tex. Burt Burnell had no idea of following me. He and a bunch of his tough Broken B cowhands waited along the trail for me to come back with those horses. He knew Tom Blue would be with me and he figured on Pete Farnsworth being along. Tom Blue and I rode into the Broken B gun trap. Burt hollered to me to get out from underfoot. Then he opened up. When the shooting started, Tom Blue threw away his gun and hollered quits. That half-breed quit like a mongrel pup."

Grizzled Tex Alvord shut her up right now. He said if she wasn't hurt, he'd give her the good hard sound spankin' she had coming for

a long time. And Tom Alvord meant just that.

"Pete here is scared of water and you called him a coward. Tom Blue is gun-shy. Outside of that, either of them two boys is as brave as the next man. But a lot of men have a fear of somethin'. I saw Circle Dot Fogarty so scared he busted out in a sweat and run when a Mexican pulled a knife on him. I know a man's scared to death of lightnin'. Me—I'm scared of snakes. Rattlesnakes, harmless bull-snakes, li'l ol' water snakes. All right, Pete. I don't need you no more. I'll stay here with Biddy. You hit the trail for the Circle Dot home ranch. Tell Fogarty to gather a quick posse an' go after Burt Burnell. Don't tackle anything alone."

Tex asked Biddy where the Burt Burnell Broken B gun trap was located and how many men Burt had and she gave Pete the location. It was there at the big pole gate to the horse camp pasture. Burt Burnell had his whole Broken B outfit with him—fifteen or twenty or twenty-five men and each of them tough enough in his own right to kill a man if he was paid for it.

Pete Farnsworth took his saddle gun and hit the trail. He knew that Tex Alvord was itching to come along. But Tex was scared Burt Burnell might take a notion to come here after her. He'd seen her ride away at a run. When Burt had spooked Tom Blue into throwing away his gun, Burt had yelled at the girl to hold on; to pull up her horse and wait for him. But she had kept going. It just might be that Burt Burnell had trailed Biddy Fogarty back here in the darkness. So Tex was staying here to ride close gun-herd on the girl.

"So long, Pete."

"So long, Tex."

Then Biddy Fogarty had reached out and taken hold of Pete's hand.

"Come back, Pete. Give me a chance to tell you I'm sorry."

Pete Farnsworth heard the sound of shooting there beyond the big pole gate at the Circle Dot horse camp. It sounded as though a lot of guns were mixed up in it. Gradually, the battle scattered and spread out, each man for himself. The sound of the gun fight was a mile away. Pete reined up in the black shadow of some brush, afraid of being shot from ambush.

Tex had told Pete to ride wide of the horse camp and head straight for the Circle Dot home ranch. But back in young Pete's mind was half-breed Tom Blue's taunting laugh and the pledge Tom had exacted from Pete. Now Tom Blue had hollered for help, demanding the claim he held on Pete's life.

Pete Farnsworth might be scared of swimming water. But he wasn't gun-shy. He had no thought of the big odds piled against him,

save that he wasn't going to be damned fool enough to make a one-man open attack.

So he sat his horse back in the shadow, gripping his gun, every muscle and nerve in his hard young body taut.

He heard somebody coming on horseback, spurring his mount to a dead run, heading straight for the closed gate. The rider came from the direction of the horse camp, riding as if the devil himself was at the heels of his horse, looking back across his shoulder like a scared coyote.

YOUNG Pete Farnsworth relaxed a little.

He knew the horse and rider. The horse was one of the string Tom Blue rode. The rider was the half-breed son of Buckskin Blue. Tom Blue was so scared he was sobbing. When he had to pull up to swing open the big pole gate, the half-breed boy was so terrified he fell rather than leaped from his horse. He was sobbing and whimpering wildly as he fumbled in the dark for the gate pin.

Pete Farnsworth laughed. He forced out the short laugh. Tom Blue heard the sound of it without recognizing Pete's voice. Tom's yell was shrill and brittle.

"Don't shoot, Burt! Don't kill me! I'm scared!"

"Take it easy, Injun!" called Pete Farnsworth.

"Pete! Save me, Pete!"

"All you got to do, Injun, is to ride through."

Pete took a chance on being bushwhacked. He rode up to the big pole gate and without dismounting he leaned down and pulled the gate pin free and swung open the pole gate.

"That squares us, Tom." Pete Farnsworth kept his voice down to a level tone. "You saved my life. I'm savin' yours. Git for home."

"Come along with me, Pete." Tom Blue's voice was an unsteady whisper. "I'm scared."

"There's nothin' to be scared of, Tom. I just rode up the trail. There's nobody bushed up anywhere along it. Tex Alvord is there at the ranch with Biddy Fogarty. Biddy said you was hollerin' for me to help you. So here I am. Before you go, tell me what's goin' on yonder. Biddy said Burt Burnell had you prisoner."

"Circle Dot Fogarty and some of his cow-punchers showed up. I got away in the excitement. Fogarty cussed me out. He told me now he'd saved my half-breed hide and for me to take it off outa sight somewheres and wash the yellow, stinkin' fear off it. Then come back and make a gun fightin' hand. Because he was in a tight. But I'm scared to go back, Pete. I'm a yellow-bellied, half-breed coward!"

"No you ain't, Tom. And neither am I. Circle Dot Fogarty ain't so big almighty brave

neither. A Mexican got locoed drunk once, years ago, and run Fogarty all over the ranch with a knife. And Tex Alvord is howlin' scared of a water snake. A man kin be scared to death of one thing and still not be a rank coward. That ain't in none of your books, but Tex Alvord knows what he's talkin' about. Quit shiverin' an' bawlin'. Who's doin' all the shootin' yonder and how many on each side?"

"Buckskin Blue," the wild terror in Tom Blue's voice was steady, "has bin scared of lightnin' all his life. First clap of thunder and he'll dive for his hole. Under the bed or anywhere."

"And Hugh Farnsworth," grinned Pete, "has bin scared of a horse since the time years ago when his foot got hung in the stirrup and he got drug a ways. All right, Injun?"

"I'm all right, Tow-head."

"Then how many men is backin' Circle Dot Fogarty?"

"Not too many. Burt Burnell's got his whole darned outfit. Fogarty showed up with about six cowhands."

"It's too far to town to fetch Vigilante help," said Pete. "Think hard, Injun."

Tom Blue fought down the fear that crawled inside him while he heard the distant sound of gunfire. A hard sparkle came into his dark eyes and his white teeth flattened in a grin.

"There's the Johnson boys."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I've swum a lot of stolen horses for the Johnson boys," said Tom Blue. "It's about time they returned the favor. I know how to git word to 'em. Come along, Pete."

Pete Farnsworth grinned faintly and took a page from the book of Tom Blue.

"Remember the night I had my sights lined on Burt Burnell, Injun? I let him live. His life belongs to Pete Farnsworth, don't it?"

"Yeah, but you'll never git Burt Burnell to admit it. You can't just put it up to purty Burt Burnell and tell him to throw down his gun and expect him to do it."

"I don't aim to make any deal like that." A grim note crept into Pete Farnsworth's voice. "I let Burt Burnell go, once. This time he don't git away. I'm killin' him. Now gather them Johnson boys if that war medicine you brag about it worth a darn. So long, Injun."

Tom Blue had a dazed look in his eyes.

"So long, tow-head," he called after Pete softly.

Then Tom Blue headed for the badlands. The trail he took twisted in and out through the broken, scrub pine-covered hills. When he had ridden into the heart of the badlands, the half-breed son of Buckskin Blue reined his sweat-marked, leg-weary horse to a halt. His black head tilted back and his face lifted

towards the sky that was graying in the first dawn and the howl of a wolf came from the half-breed boy's throat. It was the howl that the leader of a wolf pack sounds when he wants to gather his pack for a prowl.

Tom Blue waited. Then not half a mile away the wolf howl was returned. Then from the badlands the wolf-howls echoes were flung back and forth and there might have been one or two wolves howling or a pack of fifty wolves howling. Then the wolf howls stopped and the last echoes died away. Tom Blue rode up on a bare butte and he and his horse stood revealed there like a man and horse carved out of the badlands rimrock sandstone until the Johnson boys rode up to where he waited for them.

BURT BURNELL and his tough Broken B cowhands had Circle Dot Fogarty trapped at his own horse camp. That was how Burt Burnell wanted it. That was how he had played it. He figured his luck was riding high and he couldn't lose. When the Broken B cowpunchers had shot and killed the few men Fogarty had brought along, Burt Burnell told his men to quit shooting. Then the handsome, spur-jingling owner of the Broken B iron voiced the dicker he had in mind.

"Let's me'n you talk cold turkey, Circle Dot."

"I got nothin' to say to you, tinhorn."

"Don't be too certain about that." Burt Burnell wasn't drunk. But he'd had enough to make him tough and mean and foxy. "Supposin' I tell you I've got your daughter, Bridget?"

"Don't lie to me, Burt."

"I don't need to lie."

"Then trot out that kid of mine. Or lemme hear the sound of her voice."

"I don't have her here. But she's easy for me to locate. And while my boys keep you here, I kin go after her and fetch her here. My boys just got orders to quit shootin'. But they kin open up again any time. And they won't miss. You kin save your hide, Circle Dot. All I want is Bridget and a half int'rest in your outfit as your son-in-law."

"Outside of that, tinhorn," there was a snarl in Circle Dot Fogarty's voice, "you ain't askin' for a thing."

"I don't like to be called a tinhorn!"

"Then lemme call you a plain, two-bit horse thief, Burnell. A cattle rustler. You hid behind the Vigilantes to steal cattle and horses, and you shifted the blame to the Johnson boys. When I found out the kind of a low-down thing you was, you knew you'd have to kill me. Hugh Farnsworth caught onto you when you used him and three of the Johnson boys to handle your stolen horses. Your Broken B cowhands double-crossed them. Three of them

Johnson boys got hung. Hugh Farnsworth was let go. I was leader of the Vigilantes and I let Hugh Farnsworth go when he whispered to me that he'd prove that some Vigilante was doin' most of the cattle rustlin' an' horse stealin' an' murdering, road-agent hold-ups. Your brand was on them stolen horses. You stole 'em from yourself and worked the brands and hired Farnsworth, and three of the Johnson boys to run them stolen horses across the river at Buck Blue's Crossin' and then you led the Vigilantes down there to hang Hugh Farnsworth an' Buckskin Blue. You'd have gotten away with that Vigilante hangin' if it hadn't bin for two bald-faced kids."

"Prove that when you're dead and gone to Hell, then, Fogarty!" Burt Burnell's voice cracked. "Kill him, you curly wolves!"

A saddle carbine cracked. Burt Burnell gave a sharp yelp of pain.

"Hold your fire, boys!" Burt Burnell's voice cracked sharply. "Which one of you drunken boneheads fired that shot? You damn near shot my head off. It earmarked me! Which one of you Broken B—"

"It was me, mister." Pete Farnsworth's voice sounded young and shrill.

Back in the coulees where the buckbrush grew thick and dense it was still dark where the last night's shadows held. But along the bare ridges the night had faded out into dawn as gray as cartridge lead and there was a crimson streak like blood across the gray blanket of sky. Out of that blood-streaked, leaden gray dawn rode two men and a boy.

Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue were neither of them men who liked to run away from anything they claimed. They had never gone farther than an old hide-out in the badlands where a Sioux war party under the war-medicine guidance of Eyes in the Sky had hidden out a long time from General Crook. Eyes in the Sky had showed the hide-out to his beloved half-breed grandson, Tom Blue. And Tom Blue had shown the hidden spot in the badlands to his squawman father Buckskin Blue.

When the time came, Tom Blue rode there to fetch Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth, with the wolf howl of the Johnson boys, back to either freedom from Vigilante punishment or a fighting death. So Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue rode up out of the blood-streaked dawn. And trailing behind, sweating in his terror of gunfire, rode Tom Blue.

Pete Farnsworth did not see his father and Buck Blue coming. All that Pete saw was Burt Burnell in his gunsights.

Pete had used his first shot to nick the ear of Burt Burnell. Now he used all his remaining cartridges to ruin that high-crowned Stetson hat. It wasn't until he fired his last shot that Pete realized he had emptied his gun.

BURT BURNELL had crouched and cringed where he sat his horse behind the buckbrush. But he hadn't been too badly scared to lose count of the shots.

"Overplayed your hand, you young coyote whelp. Gimme that young Pete Farnsworth, boys. I want his coyote scalp to give my best girl, Biddy. I'll cut him down while you curly wolves git Circle Dot Fogarty. . . ."

Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth spurred their horses down the bald ridge and at the Broken B gun-slingers scattered in the brush below. The squawman and Johnny Bull came shooting. Circle Dot Fogarty rode out to meet them and the blazing guns of those three men cut into the brush and smoked out the Broken B cowhands.

It was a short and hard and bitter gunfight.

Hugh Farnsworth rode down at Burt Burnell, and the owner of the Broken B was so shaken and shocked into cold sobriety and into the fear of certain death, that his bullets went wild. He spurred his horse in a last desperate effort to get away with a bullet-nicked hide. Burt Burnell charged straight into the deadly fire of Buckskin Blue's gun, was shot from the saddle of his stampeding horse.

Pete Farnsworth came out of the brush with an empty gun. He looked straight into the eyes of his father who had slid his sweaty horse to a halt and swung from his saddle.

"I would like," said Hugh Farnsworth, "to shake the hand of my son."

Then when Pete shook hands with his father, Tom Blue rode up with Buckskin Blue and Circle Dot Fogarty, one arm in a make-shift blood-stained sling. The three older men exchanged quick looks and then they left the two boys together and rode around to tally the dead and to send the wounded Broken B renegades along their one-way trail out of Montana.

Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue looked into each other's eyes for a long moment. Men do that same thing when they size one another up in an effort to appraise their true value. But two boys that age are far more hard and critical of one another because, until a man reaches maturity, he lacks tolerance. It is youth who is exactly cruel—and sometimes more just in his judgment than a man, because a man's standards can be tainted by things like the lust for power.

Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth had no selfish longing for power, no need of money. But they did know what it meant to want the love and respect of a girl.

Their eyes met and held and slid away in a strange self-consciousness. Enmity, if ever there had been any, was completely gone. There was a comradeship there now.

Then Tom Blue, perhaps to cover that embarrassment when neither boy could find the right words to tell what he had in his heart, looked up at the dawn.

Tom grinned and pointed into the last night's sky that had broken into a blood-stained leaden dawn and now promised a cloudless Montana day.

"You see that star, Pete. Watch it till it fades. Make your wish. Whatever it is that you wish, it will come true. That's good medicine."

Pete and Tom watched the morning star fade in a new sky, and they made their wish.

Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue and Circle Dot Fogarty watched the two boys and liked what they saw.

"This Montana country," said Circle Dot Fogarty, "is plenty big to hold the three of us. Hold us together as friends."

Over where the two boys stood, Tom Blue bragged a little. And Pete Farnsworth believed him then and during all the years that were to follow when their partnership held and endured and became all the stronger.

"Her Sioux name is Fawn, Pete. She's a full blood. I guess I kin scrape up enough of them Broken B ponies Burt Burnell don't need no more, to buy her accordin' to the ways of the Sioux. Then we'll git a circuit-rider parson to marry us accordin' to white man's ways. Like Buckskin Blue married the daughter of Eyes in the Sky. You made your wish, Pete, on the star?"

"I made my wish, Tom. It's already answered. I wished for Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue to always stay pardners."

"Same thing I wished." Tom Blue's eyes were bright in the dawn.

Perhaps grizzled Tex Alvord had something of Sioux belief. He pointed out the fading morning star to little Bridget Fogarty as he rode along slowly with her and into sight of the three waiting men and two boys.

Old Tex Alvord put it into words with his slow deliberate drawl.

"Looks like it's all over here, young 'un, but the shoutin'. That's young Pete Farnsworth waitin' fer you, child. You'll marry that tow-head kid in a year or two and be almighty happy."

"That is what I wished on the morning star, Tex. I won't run away from Pete . . . ever. . . ."

Then the rising sun glinted in the puckered blue eyes of grizzled old Tex Alvord of Rocky Point Crossing, and he spoke again.

"Tom Blue will always be gun-shy. And Pete Farnsworth will always be scared of swimmin' water. But that'll never keep them two men from bein' almighty brave in the eyes of men."

THE END

DEAD MEN LEAVE NO TRAIL!

By
**MARVIN J.
JONES**



Danny's gun made a tight arc, stabbing flame.

Coffin-makers and undertakers started a twenty-four-hour work-day when rancher Danny Owen set a corpse to hold a dead man's watch, and baited a man-trap with his own life's blood!

DANNY OWEN reined in his bronc, blue eyes dazed and his jaw slacking off like a hinged brick. He wagged his head from side to side, his gaze travelling up and down the new barb-wire fence that effectively divided Danny's Rolling R graze from the Rolling R water.

Now Danny knew why so many cattle had been making the long trek from the south range to water at the muddy drip of a pool on

the west section. Also, why some of them carried fresh cuts and scratches on their leathery hides. Danny brought his jaw up into place and held it there so firmly that his good-natured mouth thinned out and lumps of muscle gathered along the bone. His blue eyes grew cloudy. He kicked his bronc into a lope and rode up to the fence.

As he got there, a horse and rider broke clear of a screening cluster of scrub oak and trotted up to the other side of the fence. Danny's face wiped clear of all expression as he recognized the rider. He reined in at the fence and waited for the other to come close.

The approaching rider sat his horse with poker-backed arrogance. It was Lars Holden, owner of the adjoining Cross Crescent, a thick-waisted, square-shouldered man with a block of a face and granite eyes. He reined in carelessly, but the cruel bit he used set his giant black back on its haunches.

"Homesteading?" Danny asked him, wryness twisting one corner of his mouth.

Lars Holden stared back at Danny, no anger in his cold eyes. He rolled a cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and then took it out—with his left hand.

"Times are changing, Owen," he said bluntly. Then he put the cigar back in his mouth and held it there, puffing at it slowly, his eyes boring into Danny's.

Danny looked at Lars, right hand resting carelessly on the saddle horn, the reins between the blunt fingers. He looked at the left hand that held the cigar to the Cross Crescent owner's lips and at the low-slung, tied-down holster on Holden's thick, left leg. Out of the corners of his eyes, Danny saw something else, too—a momentary flash of sun against metal a scant hundred yards to the left, in a boulder pile. Danny folded his hands on his saddle horn and grinned mirthlessly.

"Times haven't changed so much that you can fence off another man's water, Holden," he told Lars grimly. "What's the idea?"

Disappointment came briefly to Holden's square face. He tossed the cigar away.

"It's going to be a dry summer, Owen. I've got to look out after my own interests," he answered crisply.

"You have to build a fence to protect them?"

Holden shrugged. "You have another water hole," he reminded Danny.

Danny's smile was not pleasant and anger made his voice dry. "You know it dries up, Lars. I've got to have the use of this one. It's never gone dry and the two ranches have been using it for years. You have no more right fencing me off from it than I would have fencing you off. I won't stand still for it. I can't!"

The Cross Crescent owner's shoulders moved again. He raised his left hand, pushed

his hat back and rubbed gently at his forehead with his fingertips.

"The fence stays, Owen," he said brusquely.

The two men eyed each other for moments and then Holden jerked his big black around and loped off, back the way he had come, passing the scrub oaks and heading on toward the Cross Crescent ranch building, miles away.

DANNY watched him go, his hands still folded on the saddle horn. He looked down across the fence at the blood-specked foam that had fallen from the black horse's mouth and then again at the blocky figure receding in the distance. Danny's face was hard, and worried lines creased at his forehead. He reined his bronc around in a slow turn, and as he did, his eyes caught the tell-tale glint of metal from the boulder pile, for the second time. That metallic gleam, coupled with Lefty's careless actions, meant but one thing to Danny. He gave no indication that he had seen anything as he rode away.

Once Danny had topped a rise and descended into a gulley, he urged his mount into a lope, turned sharply to the right and bent low in the saddle. Circling around, he came up against the cliff wall, several hundred yards from where he had seen the sun reflect from the gun barrel. He tied the bronc to a scrub oak, ducked under the fence and wormed his way from hollow to hollow, boulder to boulder, until the sound of voices reached him. The .45 hugging Danny's leg whispered against the leather as he drew it free and stepped around an outcropping of rock.

Two men sat crosslegged in the shade of a boulder. Their mounts were tethered in a niche in the cliff wall. A blanket was spread between the men and one of them, heavy-shouldered and swarthy, dealt from a greasy deck of cards. Danny recognized both men. They were Cross Crescent hands—new ones. Danny had done some idle wondering about them when he had first seen them in town. Now he understood. Holden had added them to the well-staffed Cross Crescent for just this job.

"Hell, he won't fight, Whip," the swarthy man was saying, in a heavy voice. "Didn't you see the way he sat there and took it and then rode away. He was licked from the start."

"He's got to fight!" Whip Randal argued. His voice was thin and reedy, like his body. His sallow face twisted as he looked at the cards he had drawn. "The only other water he's got is one measly little mudhole. Like Lars says, he'll be down here tonight and tear that fence down."

The swarthy man laughed. "Start to tear the fence down!" he corrected. He made his discard and reached out one great paw for the deck. He was known as Beef Barlow and

was well named. He had a short, heavy body and sloping, muscular shoulders.

Danny eared the hammer back on his .45 and stepped into view.

"Easy, gents," he said grimly as the two men began to scramble to their feet.

Whip Randal raised both skinny arms to their full length, his sallow face slack with fear. Beef Barlow stared for an instant and his right hand tensed. Danny grinned coldly at him and Barlow's thick paw relaxed and his arms slowly went skyward, dark face going darker as the blood rushed to it.

"You think you're pretty cute, Owen, don't you? Sneaking around like a coyote to get behind our backs!"

Danny laughed at him. "Unbuckle your belts—easy like," he told them grimly. "And kick them over this way. The party isn't over; it's just starting." He watched them steadily as the two men surlily complied. Then he edged around them and picked up one of the two Winchesters that leaned against a boulder. He looked it over critically and then holstered the .45. He herded the two men out of the boulder pile.

"I want that fence torn down," Danny said coldly. He raised the rifle carelessly and pressed the trigger. It cracked sharply and a piece of wood splintered from the end post, where the fence ran across the gap of the valley neck. "From there,"—he levered in another cartridge, swung the muzzle to the opposite end of the fence and splinters flew again—"to there."

Throwing in a third cartridge, he lowered the Winchester and stared grimly at the men. "Get busy," he ordered through clenched teeth.

Beef Barlow opened his mouth to bluster and the bore of the rifle pointed right into it.

"Get this straight," Danny cut in coldly, before the heavy man could speak. "You laid in wait for me—hoping I'd throw down on Holden and give you an excuse to cut me

down. I know that Holden hired you just to run this particular shenanigan on me. You'll tear down that wire, drag it over to the gorge and push it over the edge—and act like you like it! And if either one of you comes within rifle range of this water hole after today, I'll shoot first and express my sorrow later. Now, get going!"

Winchester in the crook of his arm, Danny squatted on his haunches in the shade of a boulder and watched while the cursing, sweating men tore and pried the wire from the posts and coiled it into awkward rolls. He supervised while they mounted, hauled the rolls to the lip of the gorge and pushed them over the edge. Then he took the mounts and weapons of the two men and took them back to the water hole, leaving Barlow and Randal to hoof a good mile. Danny was grinning as he rode away. If he was any judge, it was going to be some time before the hands of the two men healed sufficiently to be of much use to Lars Holden as gunhands.

Danny went homeward at a brisk trot, squinting a calculating eye at the sun as it began its downward sweep through the western sky. What breeze there had been, died away and a dry stillness settled over the rolling grazelands. Suddenly, far to Danny's rear, came two faint, flat sounds that were unmistakably shots. Danny reined in sharply and turned in the saddle, frowning at the series of rises that obstructed his view.

There was no repetition of the sounds. Danny hesitated a moment and then wheeled the bronc around and started back at an easy gallop. When he topped the last rise, before reaching the water hole, Danny dismounted and wormed his way up to the crest and carefully looked over the end of the valley. There was no one in sight. Mounting again, Danny spurred the bronc on down to the water hole and cautiously circled the boulder pile where he had surprised Barlow and Whip Randal playing cards. He saw nothing and drew no

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE

***F-N TEST?**



*The Famous
Finger Nail Test

1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head. —if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.

YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK
LIKE THIS WITH NEW

**WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL**

2 Only a little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or toilet goods counter.



CREAM-OIL CHARLIE
SAYS: "IT CONTAINS
LANOLIN!"

3 TUNE IN... 2
NETWORK
SHOWS! "The
Adventures of
Sam Spade" Sun.
evenings, CBS
Network; "King
Cole Trio Time"
Sat. afternoons,
NBC Network.



fire. Puzzled, Danny rode boldly among the rocks and searched them thoroughly.

Slowly and still frowning, Danny rode to the gorge and dismounted at the lip. As he peered over the edge, the breath caught in his throat. The sprawled bodies of Beef Barlow and Whip Randal lay beside the rolls of wire. Quickly, Danny slid down the steep slope. There was no question about it. Both men were dead—shot through the heart.

Danny squatted down beside the bodies, the lines in his face deepening and hardening as he rolled and smoked a cigarette. When it was finished, Danny rolled and began to smoke another. The shadows were creeping across the bottom of the gorge, but the lines in Danny's face were beginning to fade. In sudden decision, he crushed the cigarette under his boot heel and cast a speculative eye at the bodies of the two men, then at the side of the gorge. There was a cold smile on Danny's lips as he tightened his belt.

IT WAS a haggard Danny that limped about the ranch house the next morning, getting together a late breakfast. When he had eaten, Danny saddled and started toward town. He had gotten no more than a mile on his way when two approaching horsemen appeared on the trail ahead, coming his way. The cold smile was back on Danny's lips as he jogged forward to meet them.

One of the riders, stiff as a ramrod in the saddle, could be only Lars Holden. The other, with an oversized Stetson crammed down to his ears and elbows moving with the slow flap of wings, was the bantam rooster figure of Sheriff Bundy.

The two men came up, Sheriff Bundy reining in with an air of dignity and importance, and Lars Holden setting his black back on its haunches with the cruel bit.

"Morning, gents," Danny said evenly. He sat his saddle carelessly, but his hand lay lean and brown against the faded right thigh of his Levi's.

Lars Holden returned Danny's stare, his pale eyes veiled by the smoke from the cigar clenched between his strong teeth. Sheriff Bundy inflated his pidgeon breast and his Adam's apple gave two quick jumps as he answered.

"Morning, Danny," he said importantly. He drew his chin down to cover his thin neck and thrust the points of his shoulders forward so that his thin arms bowed over the two guns slung at his thighs. "Where you going?" he demanded.

Danny stared at him with a detached, polite interest, not answering, his eyes cold and unwavering. The blood rose slowly to the lawman's face, but his hooded eyes shifted uneasily to his companion.

"Where are my men, Owen?" Lars Holden asked bluntly, around the cigar.

Danny didn't answer that either. There was a little silence and then Danny spoke, a dangerous edge in his voice.

"If you gents got a play to make—make it," he suggested gently. "First you ask me something that isn't any of your business and then ask me something that isn't any of mine. You got to do better or the conversation is going to come to a standstill."

Sheriff Bundy's Adam's apple bobbed angrily in his neck, but his hands stayed away from the twin guns. Holden took the cigar from his mouth and rolled it between thick fingers.

"We're looking for Barlow and Randal. I left them guarding the fence last night. Their horses showed up at the ranch this morning, but they didn't." Holden hesitated and then went on. There was no anger in his voice. "I went out looking for them. I saw the fence was gone—so I called in the sheriff. Anything wrong in that?"

"Not yet," said Danny.

"I'm just investigating it, that's all," Sheriff Bundy said in an aggrieved tone.

"I don't want to keep you," Danny said politely. He reined his bronc to one side so that the two men could pass.

Lars Holden nodded curtly and touched spurs to the giant black. The stallion lunged with the spurs, then reared against the bit. When his forelegs came down, Danny stared into the muzzle of Holden's .45.

"Hell!" said Danny calmly. "That wouldn't have fooled anybody."

Lars Holden shrugged. "Get his gun," he ordered the sheriff.

The lawman reined his mount around behind Danny and took the gun from Danny's holster with nervous fingers.

"Now," the Cross Crescent owner said, with heavy significance, mouthing his cold cigar, "we'll find out what happened to my men."

A half-hour later, the three men stood at the edge of the gorge and looked down on the scene below. The sheriff gaped incredulously, but it was Lars Holden that Danny watched. For the first time since Danny had known him, the Cross Crescent owner lost his composure.

"W-well," Sheriff Bundy finally stuttered, his throat bobbing spasmodically. "There's one of 'em." He added hesitantly as neither of the other men spoke. "He looks dead."

"Kinda," Danny said. He grinned wryly.

"That's Barlow, but where's Whip Randal?" Lars Holden asked. There was an odd, worried note in his voice and his eyes narrowed a little as he looked at Danny.

"Why, I dunno," Danny returned blandly. "Is he supposed to be here?"

Blood flooded Holden's face. He started to

make an impassioned retort, but instead, he tightened his lips around the cigar.

Sheriff Bundy cleared his throat. "It looks kind of bad for you, Danny," he said hesitantly. "What with the fence being tore down and all, and Beef Barlow salivated and thrown down there with the wire. I guess I'll have to place you in custody until I investigate this thing. You say you sent Randal along with Barlow to guard this fence?" he asked puzzledly, turning to Lars Holden.

"That's right," the Cross Crescent owner answered crisply.

The scrawny lawman scratched his nose. "Well, I wonder what happened to him," he said frowning.

Danny laughed shortly. "It looks kind of simple to me," he told the sheriff. "Barlow and Randal had an argument over something. Whip Randal shot him and then vamoosed."

Sheriff Bundy tugged his hat down viciously and scratched his nose again.

"If I'd shot Barlow, Randal would have reported it by now," Danny went on smoothly.

"What about the fence, though?" the sheriff wanted to know. "How come they tore that down?"

"Oh, I supervised that little job last night," Danny answered serenely. "I sneaked up and got the drop on them and made them take it down. Probably, after I left, they got to arguing about whose fault it was. Whip Randal beat Barlow to the draw and killed him. Then, rather than go back and face Holden here—or maybe stand trial for murder—why he just up and lit out for parts unknown. That's the way I see it."

HOLDEN'S face had a purplish tinge. He spat the cigar from his mouth and picked his way down the slope to where the body of Beef Barlow lay amid the tangle of barbed wire. Danny and the sheriff watched as he prowled around the bottom. There was a tight smile on Danny's lips when he saw the Cross Crescent owner suddenly stiffen and then bend over to examine something he had found. In a moment, Holden came scrambling up the bank, breathing heavily, his face gray. Agitation lay along the muscles of his jaw and in the nervous movement of his hands, but his voice was as crisp and cool as ever.

"Whip Randal was down there," he said, biting off each word. "There's a trail of blood leading along the gorge and then up the bank. Randal must have been wounded bad from the looks of it."

"Well, what do you know!" Danny said, his forehead creasing into a frown.

Sheriff Bundy was bent over the blood trail like a rooster over a worm.

"Looks like he's headed toward your place, Lars," he said excitedly.

"You take Owen on back to town and lock him up," Holden ordered brusquely. "If my boys get wind of this, they'll string him up in nothing flat. Not that it wouldn't be the best way," he added coldly. "I'll trail Randal down and see if he's still alive."

"That makes sense to me," Sheriff Bundy said nervously. He looked in the direction of the Cross Crescent ranch, as though he expected to see a mass of riders pouring over the hill and rob him of his chance to parade down Main street with his prisoner. "I'll be right back out soon's I lock Danny here up. C'mon, boy, let's get going."

"Right with you, Pop," Danny answered indifferently and swung into the saddle.

Danny and Sheriff Bundy left Holden trying to unravel the trail over the hard ground and started back to town.

"You ride ahead of me," the lawman ordered importantly. "Not that I think you'd try to escape, but it's my duty not to take no chances."

"Sure," Danny said agreeably.

They topped a rise and then another. As they descended the slope of the second and reached the bottom of a ravine, Danny reined in suddenly, swearing his amazement.

"Look!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Randal must have circled around and headed for town." He leaned over in the saddle, examining the ground carefully.

Sheriff Bundy drew abreast eagerly, stretching out his long neck, eyes seeking the trail that Danny had claimed to find. It was his turn to swear in amazement, as he felt one of his twin .45's jump from its holster.

"Hey!" he said weakly.

Danny grinned over the barrel of the sheriff's weapon and the lawman's arms jumped into the air. Danny slipped the other .45 from the holster, and plucked his own Colt from the sheriff's waistband. Anger brought the lawman's chest out and puffed at his red cheeks.

"After I save you from being lynched, you play a low-down trick on me," he complained bitterly. "I treat you like a gent and—and—"

"Easy does it," Danny grinned, and then crispness came into his voice. "Look, Sheriff. It strikes me that we can find Randal and clear this thing up in a jiffy and save you and me both a lot of trouble. Now, I'll give you back your guns, if you'll string along with me on a plan I got. You feel agreeable?"

"You—" began the lawman angrily, and then cunning came into his eyes. "All right," he agreed, too quickly. He reached out for the guns.

Danny ignored the other's outstretched hands. He reined in close and thrust the guns back into the sheriff's holsters.

"Let's go," Danny said, wheeling his bronc,

"I got a hunch we can find something interesting over near the Cross Crescent."

Danny slapped the flank of the sheriff's mount and the two horses started off at a gallop, with Danny guiding them in a wide circle around the ill-fated water hole and gorge. An hour's hard riding brought them out on the far side of the Cross Crescent ranch buildings. Over Sheriff Bundy's wailing objections, Danny forced him to dismount in a canyon and the two picked their way to the top of a crest that overlooked the buildings.

"What in tarnation are you up to?" demanded the sheriff, as he lay panting beside Danny and stared down upon the Cross Crescent, then added in amazement. "Look! Who's that?"

The sheriff pointed a quivering finger at a rise a hundred yards to their right. The figure of a man lay at the top of the rise, full length, on his belly. A Winchester was fitted to his shoulder.

"That's Whip Randal," Danny explained calmly. "He's got a little grudge to settle with Holden."

Sheriff Bundy's Adam's apple bobbed with agitation. "You mean to say you're going to sit here and watch someone get shot and not do anything about it?" he demanded.

"That's right," Danny agreed serenely. "And so are you," he added grimly as the lawman attempted to get to his feet again.

"Look here—" Sheriff Bundy blustered and then subsided when Danny's hand tightened on his arm.

"Watch!" Danny ordered tensely.

A RIDER had appeared over a ridge to their right and behind where Whip Randal lay. For a few moments, both horse and rider were motionless against the skyline. Suddenly the horseman ducked low in the saddle and wheeled his mount back over the rise and out of sight.

"Wasn't that Lars Holden?" Sheriff Bundy asked puzzledly.

"It was," Danny answered grimly.

"What'd he duck back for when he seen us?" the lawman wanted to know.

"He didn't see us. He saw Whip Randal," Danny explained patiently.

"Then he thinks Whip is laying for him," Sheriff Bundy said excitedly.

"That's exactly what he thinks," Danny admitted.

The lawman frowned thoughtfully. "You know," he said finally, "there's something awfully funny about this. I wonder if—"

Sheriff Bundy broke off. There was a movement on the ridge again and the head and shoulders of the Cross Crescent owner appeared. There was the glint of sunlight on a

rifle barrel, then three quick puffs of smoke blossomed from the ridge.

The lawman swore his astonishment. It was apparent that the shots had been fired at the motionless figure of Whip Randal.

"That was murder!" exploded Sheriff Bundy. "Cold-blooded murder!"

"He made sure that time!" Danny said grimly. The figure of Whip Randal lay sprawled in the same position, but the rifle barrel now slanted toward the sky. "C'mon," Danny ordered the lawman. "We'll double back and come up the rise from the other side."

The two men wormed their way out of the boulders and ran along the ravine until they came to the point opposite the ridge where Whip Randal's body lay. Cautiously they climbed the ridge. As they reached the top they saw Lars Holden bending over Whip's body. He had laid his Winchester aside. He straightened as his ear caught the sound of their footsteps and whirled, his face contorted with bewilderment and anger.

"Hi!" greeted Danny casually, and then added politely, "Did you get him?"

"It was him or me," Holden said crisply. "He was lying in wait for me. God only knows why."

"I know why," Danny said softly.

Lars Holden straightened again and then whirled with startling suddenness. Danny's arm had already started moving. It made a tight arc and as it came up, flame stabbed roaringly into Holden's face.

The Cross Crescent owner dropped the gun he had plucked from the dead man's holster and his hand moved upward as though to cover his face. It never reached there. His body suddenly relaxed and crumpled and he fell backward over Whip Randal's stiff form.

"He didn't fool me that time either," Danny remarked with quiet satisfaction.

"T-tell me about it," he said finally.

"Well," Danny said thoughtfully. "He hired these two hardcase jiggers just on purpose to run me off my spread. When they muffed the fence deal, he shot them, knowing I'd get the blame."

Sheriff Bundy frowned. "That's why he insisted on trailing Randal alone when it turned out Whip was only wounded, huh?"

"When he thought Whip Randal had been wounded," Danny corrected. "He killed them both dead enough. I packed Whip over here on my horse and set him up in that position."

"But dead men don't bleed," he objected. "Whose trail was that leaving the gorge?"

"That was me—in Whip's boots," Danny said calmly. He rolled up his sleeve and pushed a strip of cloth back from his forearm. "I just nicked a vein and let a little drip out."

BIG EFF'S PEACEFUL BATTLE CALL

Neither the snarl of lead nor the flash of deadly range-hog guns could lure Big Eff Ade's peaceful soul from its somnolence. . . . Until an outlaw bullet drew blood from the hide of his favorite mule, Tequila, and turned that war-dodging well-digger into a blood-mad, sledge-hammer killer!

Big Eff poised for a moment. Then he flung the hammer at Tober.



By

RUEL McDANIEL

TEQUILA was being contrary again. As Shorty Sims yanked back on the trace-chains to hitch the black-backed, gray-bellied mule to the windlass, the animal stiffened his short, powerful hind legs and refused to budge.

"Hitchin' him up ten minutes early," Big Eff Ade grinned, "an' the rascal don't like it. Can't say I blame 'im much, but Rattler's petered out. Nothin' else to do."

Big Eff placed a powerful arm on each side of the mule's neck, right against his shoulders. Without even a grunt, he lifted the mule's front feet six or eight inches clear of the ground and shoved him suddenly back.

"You hadn't oughta strain yoreself that-away," Shorty admonished. "We ain't in that big a hurry."

"Shucks." Big Eff's red mustache quivered with his grin. "'Twarn't no strain. Tequila don't weigh more'n seven hun'ed pounds. He's jest a little critter. But he's the best water-well mule in Texas!" He slapped the animal's rump lightly and patted him along the back. "Mighty loyal animal—for a mule."

Big Eff stopped short. He shaded his eyes and gazed at a horse and rider, motionless atop a small mesa, about a third of a mile away. "Looks bad," he mumbled, wiping sweat from his wide forehead with a bare hand nearly as big as a skillet. "Think that's a J-T rider. Wish Harm 'ud come on in."

By the time they lowered the twelve-inch, octagon-sided cypress curbing to the bottom of the hole and slid the boring bit back down, Harm Saddler rode up.

"I'm a worryin' some," Big Eff complained to Harm, owner of the little, down-at-the-heels Double-Five spread. He told the rancher about the rider. "Purty sure he was a J-T spy."

Deep lines showed in the lean cheeks of Harm Saddler, and worry and loss of sleep registered around his sunken-looking eyes. "Could be," he sighed. "I left three of our boys at the dam, firing away. So far it's worked. Maybe Jake's getting wise—all that firing and no effort to storm his dam. How much longer 'fore the well'll be down, Eff?" He talked in a dreary voice that reminded the big well-driller of a dog barking at a knot.

BIG EFF ADE was the biggest man in the brasada. And the gentlest. Worry-lines roped his big face, showing through the red stubble that grew nearly up to his soft, blue eyes. He was no cowman, only a well digger; but he'd seen little men buck big outfits before, and pity touched him as he looked upon the worry-gripped face of Harm Saddler, a two-bit rancher down to his last trick. Suffering on a man's face cut him like a two-edged blade and his eyes touched Saddler and brought back something of the little cattleman's desperation in this final moment.

Big Eff looked at the departing sun, drawing water as if mocking Shorty Sims and his thirst-crazed herd. He rubbed his great palms together and urged Tequila to a faster pace.

"If we hit water at eighty feet, like we figgered, and we don't have no set-backs, water should be gushin' outa this hole this time tomorrow. And it won't be a minute too soon. Them old mossy-backs that shy at a human

a mile away been nosin' right up amongst us and lickin' the wet sand we haul outer the hole. Them cows gone far as they can without water, Harm."

Saddler's shoulders slumped. "I know. Found four dead calves on the bank of the dry creek this mornin'. Cattle lyin' in the soft mud of the creek bed, lookin' up at me with the whites of their eyes wallin' around. And bawlin' at me. It's enough to break a man's heart, Eff. And the way Jake Tober's settin' back and gloatin'. That makes a man want to kill!" Harm's shoulders stiffened and there was fire in his dark eyes now that Eff hadn't seen in a week.

"It's water by tomorrow night or nothin', Eff. The cattle are too weak to drive to any market—if there was any. Jake Tober's squat-tin' up there at his fancy headquarters, waitin' for me to crawl to him and accept his offer of two dollars a head all 'round for my herd. I'd as soon die. But I can't set by and see the cattle suffer much longer!" He flexed his arms and his fists opened and closed.

Jake Tober himself removed all doubt as to the identity of the rider atop the little mesa. Flanked by five of his hired gunhawks, he galloped his sixteen-hundred-pound, iron-gray stallion through the beat-out trail of the cactus and prickly-pear jungle and skidded the stallion to a stop at the little clearing made for the well.

"Ha!" he bellowed like a rancher who'd caught his top-hand running a foreign brand on a calf. "So you're drilling yot a well? Digging your own water supply. Stubborn, eh? I thought something was loco when you stopped trying to rush my dam and blow it out. Might have known you'd be up to some kind of coyotin' around."

He cut his eyes around at his five henchmen, then he spurred his gray almost against Saddler. "Now get this, you little pack rat. There won't be a well here or anywhere else on this range! I need more space. I'm spreading out. I'm taking over here. That offer's still open today. Tomorrow it won't be. Take it now and clear out, or—" He let it go at that, whirled his mount and thundered back through the cactus-lined trail.

Big Eff Ade stood with his huge feet slightly apart, his high-laced boots as solid and almost as large as foundations for a feed house. He softly fingered the slick handle of a twenty-pound sledgehammer he used about his drilling. Once or twice, while Jake Tober threatened, Big Eff had hefted the hammer with two fingers of his right hand, and his heavy-lidded eyes had shown his thoughts. Rumor had it that Eff once broke a gunman's neck in a saloon brawl with just his thumb and forefinger.

Harm Saddler called Shorty, two of his

riders, and Eff together. "This is the showdown, fellers. This is it. I felt awful sorry for them pore critters out there, with no fresh water in more'n a week. But I'll be a ring-tailed catamount if I'll give 'em over to Jake Tober. If I did, it'd not only be the end of my little spread but the finish of the whole Cactus Creek valley.

"His dam hurts nobody but me now. I happen to be the first spread standin' in his way. When I'm out of the way, it's only a matter of time till he'll not be satisfied. He'll go right on down the valley, taking the springs and branches that water the spreads below here."

Big Eff momentarily stood erect with his great shoulders back, towering six feet eight inches and weighing two hundred eighty-five pounds, with not an ounce of surplus flesh evident. "You're headin' for a showdown fight with Jake. We got nine feet yet to drill, to hit eighty. We've made better'n ten feet a day so far.

"As I told you when we parleyed about drillin' this well in the fust place, I'm a peaceful man. I don't hire out to do nobody's fightin'. But like I told you, I'm packin' a personal reason for helpin' you square things with Jake Tober. So, you and yore boys do the fightin' and I'll do the drillin'."

A MILD shame touched him. Saddler's crew was gun-short and every man was desperately needed if fighting started, Eff well knew. It shamed him that he was backing off. But he had a way of life and that way was against shooting. He'd made a promise to himself a long time ago, and when the thought of breaking that promise entered his brain he was ashamed of that too. Big Eff was, in that moment, a man both ashamed and a little proud. He had looked at his feelings and he knew he was not afraid of Jake Tober or any man, and knowing in this moment that he was not a coward heartened him. Harm Saddler and his men would have to understand. They must understand that it was just as important to keep the drill going as it was to sling lead.

Eff looked off into the wild brush in the direction of the headquarters of Jake Tober's J-T spread. "My guess is, Jake and his gun-hawks'll be back by daylight in the mornin'. Mebbe sooner."

Harm Saddler sighed. "Shorty, ride over and call the three boys in from Tober's dam. No need keeping up the pretense of raiding the dam now. Tober's in on the well. Tell 'em to go by the house and eat, get their bed-rolls and some extra grub. Then ride here. We'll take turns standing guard."

"Gimme one good hand and I'll keep the drill grindin' all night," Big Eff said, warming up to the coming showdown. "We can spade the dirt and mud from the well around a little,

to form a barricade in front of the trail. We—"

"Remember, I got my name on that tall galoot with the yeller hair, Tober's top-hand," Shorty Sims butted in. "He's been wallin' his eyes at my gal. He's my meat!"

Harm Saddler took stock. "We're eight, counting you, Eff. Jake can muster around twenty-two men, with the three new gunmen he imported two weeks ago, right after he finished the dam. It's eight against twenty-two. Pretty hard odds. If any of you men, or any of them at the house, want to withdraw, now's the time. You that will stay—arm yourselves and bring all yore spare shells. We'll be holed up here for a finish fight. Shorty, bring my extra Smith and Wesson for Eff here—"

"Not for me," Big Eff interrupted. "You know I don't have any truck with guns. My Pa died 'cause he built a reputation as a gun-slick. It got to where every gun-fanner he brushed with had a hankerin' to test Pa's draw. Like Pa always said, you never get so fast with a gun that some hombre don't come along sooner or later who's a little faster. Pa knowed he was gonna die by the gun. He kept tellin' me never to have no truck with guns. I'll keep the drill turnin'. You boys do the shootin'."

DAWN drove the darkness from the depths of the brasada and the denizens of the night scampered to the security of the jungle of cactus, scrub oak and mesquite. Half the crew had been on guard around the drilling-site all night, and now the other four men rode down the lane between thick jungle undergrowth into the circular opening beat out of the thicket for the well.

A shallow hole had been scooped out near the well-site, for a water tank when the water started to flow from artesian depths. The soft dirt from this hole, plus that which had come from the thirteen-inch hole provided reasonably safe protection from attack.

"When they come at us, it'll just about have to be from down the trail," Harm Saddler reasoned. "No man can go far in that prickly-pear and cactus thicket."

"Not if he expects to set down to his meals, anytime soon," Shorty put in.

Big Eff Ade had not closed his eyes all night. With one of Saddler's men, he had kept the drill gouging deeper and deeper into the alluvial loam. The last haul-out had showed wet sand on the drill bit. Eff had predicted water at any moment. It looked as though Jake Tober had decided to let the well come in, after all.

"Ain't like Jake," Harm reasoned. "Feared he's got somethin' up his sleeve. He ain't a man to take defeat layin' down."

"You're right. Look who's comin'," Big Eff

said dryly. His eyes suddenly slitted and hardened.

Now halted in the trail forty yards from the well were Jake Tober and at least ten men, each swinging a Winchester across the saddle in front of him.

"You got exactly two minutes to unhitch that mule and get your crew away from there!" Jake bellowed through cupped hands. Tober was a stockily-built man about thirty-five who had come back from the Civil War with a determination to be the biggest cattleman in the brasada. He moved his hands nervously and kept touching his black mustache.

Big Eff settled himself in the slush-pit near the hole, where he could watch the drill turning and keep Tequila moving steadily in the circular, beaten-out path around the hole. He saw Harm Saddler signal his seven punchers to ease into the shallow hole behind the protection of the wide circle of fresh dirt.

Eff tapped the rachet around the drill-rod with his sledgehammer.

Harm Saddler said, "We aim to finish this well. Better stay out of our way!"

Jake Tober shot first. His bullet whined off the slick wooden drum of the windlass. "Shoot 'em down—like lobos!" he yelled to his men.

The J-T gunmen leaped from their rearing mounts and ducked into crevices in the trail. Tober squatted on his haunches and peered from around a scrub-oak and fired again. Six other guns roared in a volley.

Tequila leaped at the sound of the firing. He jerked the windlass pole frantically around, kicking and pawing, until he knew he couldn't run away from the commotion. Then he stopped directly behind the windlass and the well-shaft and refused to budge an inch.

It suddenly came to Big Eff that his prized drilling mule was exposed to the fire. He dashed out, unhooked his traces and slapped him harshly across the rump with the lead-rope. The mule leaped into the shallow hole, walked over and nose-nudged Rattler, the other mule.

Lead thudded into the windlass-drum, the protruding well-curb, the cypress timber by the side of the well. Other bullets buried themselves harmlessly in the soft dirt, kicking particles into the faces of the Saddler riders.

"Take it slow," Harm cautioned his men. "Make every shot count. This may go on all day. When you see a galoot's body move, let him have it. Don't shoot at shadows!"

After the first three or four volleys, the attacking fire died down to an occasional shot. Eff could see by the movement of the brush along the edge of the trail that the gang was jockeying for better position. He knew the brasada, though, and he knew going through the brush and prickly-pears would be slow and painful at best.

Suddenly two guns roared from the opposite direction. Eff flung his huge body around. He saw the tops of dwarf mesquite shaking. Some of the J-T gang had crawled through the thicket from upcreek. Probably, Eff thought, that explained the attack's delay. They had not expected it later than daybreak. Tober evidently had waited until these men had beat a trail around behind the well. Eff recalled now that he had heard faint noises in the brush during the night and cursed himself for not investigating. He'd supposed it was a cougar or a coon on the prowl.

The firing from upstream had forced Saddler's men to dive for cover in the center of the shallow tank excavation. From this position, they were at a disadvantage in firing themselves.

Now the lead came in fierce volleys from one vantage point to another nearer the well. "They're closin' in," he muttered.

He knew he should be working on the well; but no animal could circle the hole, exposed as the path was, without being hit. Sure, he hired out to drill a well for Harm Saddler, and by bringing in water today, he could save Saddler's cattle and square an old debt he'd been holding a long time against Jake Tober. But he couldn't bring himself to expose his mules to fire from two sides. It was dangerous enough for the animals as it was, with their backs exposed, and their heads bobbing up and down above the barricade now and then. The situation was bad.

A J-T gunman arrogantly hunkered over right in the middle of the trail and aimed. Before he could pull trigger, a slug from Shorty's rifle set him back on his heels. Then he slowly folded up and the gun slipped from his hands. "That'll teach you to fool around with my gal!" Shorty snorted.

Another J-T man slithered from the brush, clutched the dying man under the shoulders and started pulling him to safety. "Hold your fire," Harm ordered. "Let 'im pull the feller to the shade."

The two men in the brush upcreek were doing the most damage. Their lead was zooming low overhead and whining off the metal of the machinery, and they were so hidden in the dense brush that nobody could get a close shot at them. One of their bullets whined off the metal collar of the drill-holder and thudded into the ground right by Eff's knee. He looked at the spot and rubbed his reddish-stubbed chin.

Suddenly the firing stopped. For fifteen minutes not a shot had sounded from either side of the clearing. "They're up to something," Saddler muttered grimly. "I can see a brush move now and then. They ain't quit-tin' yet. Keep yore damned eyes peeled, fellers!"

TIME WAS precious. Big Eff knew Jake Tober could profit by a delay, while Saddler's cattle died for want of the water that lay, cool and life-giving, down there at the edge of his drill-bit. No, Harm Saddler couldn't afford to play a waiting game—not unless the bit was boring nearer and nearer to life-saving water.

Eff stalked out, led the protesting Tequila back to the pole and hitched his traces. He slapped the little mule gently across the rump and the drill started revolving again.

The drill had been turning for maybe half an hour, without molestation from the J-T outfit on either side.

Then it happened!

Yelling men sprang from the thicket at the very lips of the clearing. They closed in on two sides—the two men from upcreek and ten from the trail.

They dove in, swinging low and weaving as they fired. Peter Chafin, a Saddler rider, went down in the first volley. A slug caught Saddler in the fleshy part of his left arm.

Eff plunged out to unhitch Tequila and a slug sent his small-brimmed black hat sailing over the embankment. "This here's gettin' unfunny," he grumbled.

Tequila was almost in the cross-fire. He reared and pawed the air with his fore-feet. He bawled and kicked at the single-tree that held his traces. The chains clattered with the punishment. "You hurt that mule and I'll—"

Eff didn't finish. From the trail side six men scampered over the embankment. Eff spotted Jake Tober. Tober's pistol roared and Tequila squealed and sent the pole spinning. Eff glanced wildly back and saw blood gush from the mule's hip.

Big Eff stood there a moment, a giant of strength, unmindful of the lead that filled the air around him. He felt a jarring in his body. His brain was a tumult and he found his thoughts a muddle of madness.

The yells of the men on both sides were far away and of no consequence. It was if he had seen all this a long time ago.

His eyes blinked wide, seeing only one thing—the angry gash across the hip of his Tequila. The little mule bawled in mortal fear and pain. And the sound of the mule's hurt touching his ears turned a disk in his mind. Only one thing mattered now.

Jake Tober had shot his mule. Jake Tober must pay!

Something like the roar of a volcano about to erupt broke from deep in Big Eff's throat. He reached down, seized his sledgehammer and straightened in a single movement.

He drew back his right hand, poised for a fraction of a second and threw the hammer.

The steel butt of it caught Jake Tabor in the face, right at the base of his nose. It lifted his feet off the ground and sent him soaring back over the embankment. His face spread to the width of Eff's two hands and blood painted the embankment. Eff knew the man was dead when he hit the ground.

Jake's men knew it too, evidently, for they scampered back at once from the withering fire of Saddler and his men. Two went down and did not move. A third dragged himself over the bank with one leg limp and useless. In less than a minute, the fight was over as suddenly as it had started.

"Whew!" Harm Saddler exclaimed as the last of the J-T gunmen scampered down the trail to their mounts.

"Thought you wouldn't kill a man," Harm said to Eff.

"I didn't say I wouldn't kill. Said I didn't use a gun. Besides, the low-down skunk shot Tequila!"

Tequila's wound was not fatal. Eff unhitched him and moved Rattler into the traces. While Saddler and his men patched their own wounds and attended the wounded J-T hands, Big Eff was making hole. By mid-afternoon pure, life-giving artesian water was gushing out of the hole and filling the tank. Cattle fought for a place at the tank.

"That kinda evens the score with Jake Tober," Big Eff sighed as he relaxed and ate red beans from a coffee cup and drank coffee from the water pail. "He pulled a stunt about like this on my brother, Oliver, up on the Frio eight years ago. I been layin' for him since, 'cause the loss of his spread so near killed Oliver, who was sick anyhow, that he died three months later. It's the same as if Tober'd murdered him."

Big Eff stood up and stretched. He yawned as he looked over the embankment and viewed his victim. Then he picked up his sledgehammer. "Shucks," he complained, "got my hammer all messed up."

Frontier Businessman

WHAT IS believed to have been the first toll bridge in California led over a flooded stream between Hangtown (now Placerville), and Diamond Springs, in El Dorado County.

During the winter of 1850, with heavy rains making travel virtually impossible, a huge tree fell in such a manner as to form a shaky footbridge across the flood-swollen creek bed. Seeing the possibilities of the situation, an ambitious miner camped at one end of the tree and charged fifty cents for permission to cross.

—Nell Murbarger



Chapter I

KILLER'S WELCOME

THE SUDDEN burst of gunfire somewhere up Pine Gulch's crowded main street barely penetrated the rhythmic clangor that filled Dave Gray's blacksmith shop. Nor did it change the steady swing of the heavy hammer in his brawny hand. The glowing horseshoe on the anvil rapidly took shape under his experienced handling. He studied it a moment.

"Election fever's growing," Dave said, raising his voice. "If I was sheriff, nobody would

ride into town today without checking his guns."

Shorty Dodson, Dave's helper, carefully tapped the iron rim on a huge wagonwheel. Turning his grimy face toward Dave, he said, "If you was sheriff, a lot of people wouldn't be wearin' guns today."

Dave made no answer. Seeing the sudden, rigid lines appear on his square-jawed face, Shorty turned back to his work. Spearing the hot shoe with his tongs, Dave plunged it into the water barrel. He stood there, watching the dirty water boil and listening to its sizzle.

Why don't they leave me alone, he thought

**Gripping Novelette
of a
Blackleg's Finish
Fight!**



The owlhoot gun that had made Dave Gray's name legend in that quick-death country had lain unused for three peaceful years. Then that boot-tough blacksmith strapped it once more to his thigh, pinned a sheriff's star on his chest, and set out to render to stern frontier law its rightful due—the corpse of his reckless killer brother!

Owlhoot Lawman's Last War



He didn't remember drawing his .45, but it was there, thundering and bucking in his hand.

grimly. When I hung up my guns, I meant it for good. I told them so, even if they did laugh at me. I've made every one of them eat crow these past three years. Still, they're watching, talking, hoping. They want to see Dave Gray end up like his brother, Curly. They'll never get that pleasure. I promised Nan—

Light boots made a scuffling beat on the plank walk outside the shop. Dave turned, a smile breaking over his dark face at the familiar sound. Billy Blaine, his kid brother-in-law, was in a hurry as usual.

The smile faded at sight of the tow-headed youngster who raced through the big door. Every big freckle on Billy's white face showed prominently. Tears lurked in his wide eyes. He paused inside the smoky shop, spotted Dave's tall figure and stumbled towards him.

"Dad—Dad—" he cried shrilly, clutching at Dave's leather apron. "He—he's bad hurt! They took him to the doctor's office! He wants you, Dave!"

SHERIFF BEN BLAINE was Billy's father. Remembering the gunshots of a few minutes ago, Dave did not bother with questions. A shooting had been inevitable. An attempt on the lawman's life was long overdue.

Dave unbuckled his apron and hung it on its peg back of the forge. He pulled his flat-topped sombrero down over his straight black hair. He strode up the street, worming his muscular arms and chest into the shirt that he always shucked while working. Even in cowman's boots, his long Levi-clad legs ate up distance with astonishing ease. Billy ran beside him, short legs pumping to keep up.

The crowd about Doc West's little office opened to let Dave through. He saw their appraising glances; his ears caught the buzz of excited comment that swept over them as he bent his head so that he could enter the door.

Dave braced himself against the mingled smell of fresh blood and pungent antiseptics. Ben Blaine lay stretched out on a table and Doc West hovered over him, gleaming surgical instruments in his hands. Nannette, Dave's wife, sat on a blanket-covered couch against the wall to his right. She stared unseeingly at Dave, her smooth, tanned face turned a dirty gray by the pallor that claimed it. Ralph Ledbetter, the other occupant of the office, managed a thin smile and a curt nod of his blond head.

"How bad, Doc?" Dave asked softly, circling the table opposite the little medico.

"Both arms shattered. One leg." West continued his work without pause. "Ben's suffering from shock and loss of blood. If his heart holds up, he'll make it. It's been acting up these last few years. I don't know—"

Dave said, "Ben musta picked on a gun-

slinger. Ain't everybody can place their slugs that neatly. How's the other fellow?"

Ledbetter cut in, "Ben never got his gun out of leather."

"He's still mighty fast for a man his age." Dave whistled soundlessly. "That gunslinger's good. Anybody I know?"

The lanky Ledbetter eyed Dave queerly. He took his time in answering. "Yeah," he murmured. "You know him. It was your brother, Curly."

Outwardly, Dave took the news without emotion. But inside he turned sick all over. Just hearing the sordid tales about Curley had been bad enough; knowing that he'd come back to town, facing the mute evidence of his wanton handiwork was something else indeed.

"Where's Curly now?" he asked tonelessly.

Ledbetter said, "In the Paradise. Drinking with Max Arnold and his crowd. Max put him on his payroll this morning. Gun wages. Everybody in town's heard about it."

"Except me." Dave circled the table again, headed for the door.

"Dave!" Nan's low husky voice stopped him. "Where are you going?"

"To the Paradise."

She got to her feet and came across the worn carpet to him. Tall, brown-haired, shapely, she could almost look into Dave's eyes without tilting her head. A quiet urgency lay in the touch of her cold fingers on his arm.

"Not yet," she begged. "Not yet. Dad's last words were of you. You've got to be here if he awakens."

"A gunless hero," said Ledbetter, "has no business bracing Max Arnold's outfit. Nan's right. You better stay here."

There was no rancor in the man's words. Dave knew him to be a personal friend of Ben Blaine. He overlooked the personal remark.

"What did Ben want?" he asked, feeling trapped, knowing full well what had been in his father-in-law's mind.

"I don't know." Nan wasn't a good liar. Tell-tale spots of color reddened her cheeks and she stared fixedly at a missing button on his shirt. "He didn't say."

You don't have to lie to me, Nan, Dave thought miserably. I know you love Curly, I knew it when we got married. Curly's such a heller, I thought you'd forget him. All of us would be better off if we could. Now he's come back and shot up your father. He isn't the same Curly you knew, Nan. I wonder if that's beginning to soak into that stubborn head of yours?

Aloud, he said, "All right. I'll stay and talk to Ben."

Doc West finished the job of putting the sheriff's limbs into splints. Dave and Ledbetter carried him into the tiny bedroom behind the office at her father's side.

LEDBETTER showed no desire to leave the office. Sitting there on the couch beside him, Dave pondered the man's reluctance to withdraw. This shooting and the bitter election could be indirectly traced back to the party of homesteaders that Ledbetter had led into Pine Valley two summers ago. Each settler had taken his section siding Buckeye River; the compact little colony had ignored the grim protests of the valley's three powerful cattle barons, Max Arnold, Jake Miessner, and Pike Storey, who grazed their pool herds wherever they pleased. They strung bobwire around their land and went about the job of irrigating it for crops. They began work on a dam which still was unfinished. When the pool riders tried to tear down their fences, the settlers fought them off with guns and sent word to the state capital asking for U. S. government aid.

The governor knew sheriff Ben Blaine well. He asked the old lawman to twist the pool's tail whenever the big outfit got too proddy. And Blaine had done a good job of it—until today.

Ben Blaine had friends, a lot of them. It kept Doc West busy at the front door, barring their entrance and explaining that the sheriff was too ill to see visitors. Dave Gray watched moodily, wondering how many people would show any concern over him if he lay in that back room. Not many, he knew. He could count them on the fingers of one hand.

"How's the election going?" he asked the nester leader idly.

"Voting's light." Ledbetter's voice was somber. "Max Arnold's man will coast in now. Ben won't be on his feet in weeks—if he pulls through this. Hoke Yancey's a cinch to win."

Dave said, "Yancey will make a hell of a sheriff. He isn't fit to stand in Ben's shadow. Your boys won't last long with him riding the law."

Flame danced in Ledbetter's pale eyes. "If it's got to be war," he snapped, "we'll fight. I've expected this. We've hired guns and some of them are in town today. There's more on the way."

"A lot of guns ride for the pool. You think you can lick them?"

"We've got to." A thin brittleness edged the lanky settler's words. "You know our setup, Gray. We located under the Desert Land Act. We paid two-bits an acre to the government for the privilege. The land isn't ours until we pay one dollar an acre more. We had three years to do it in—and we had to start irrigating within that period. That's why we started the dam. Time's growing short. We've got one year left in which to prove up our homesteads. We'll fight to hold them."

"You might've gotten away with fences," Dave mused aloud, "but the dam is something

else. The pool's cows have got the lower end of the valley to water in—provided there's any water to drink."

Ledbetter mumbled, "Our dam will be a boon to the pool. The river dries up to a trickle every summer. We store the water up in Smoky Canyon during the spring run-off and there's plenty for everybody all year around. You've heard our argument."

"Plenty. But the pool has its side too. It was here first, and that means a lot in this country. If your colony's successful, it'll keep growing until it hogs Buckeye from one end of the valley to the other. Yet you can't blame Max Arnold and his pals for fighting back."

Ledbetter pounded on his Levi-clad knee with his big horny fist. "All over the West, the cattle interests are putting up that argument. Civilization is on its way. A few men can't hog all the land. They've got to share it with others. Can't you see that? And it can be done without bloodshed, if only men like Max Arnold would be reasonable."

"Dave." Nan stood in the bedroom door. "Father's awake. You can see him now."

"He shouldn't be talking," warned the doctor. "Just a few words. That's all."

The little medico left the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Dave stepped softly to the bedside. Ben Blaine stared up at him, pain and anxiety clouding his faded eyes.

". . . I didn't think Curly would shoot me. . . ." Dave leaned over so he could hear the old man's labored words ". . . Aimed to put him in jail . . . on that old murder charge. You can stop him, Dave—you got to! No matter what Nan thinks . . . or your own feelings . . . tell Ralph Ledbetter to scratch my name and put yours up—for sheriff. . . ."

Dave looked across the bed at Nan. Her brown eyes flashed, grew stormy. Her lips curved downward. He caught the slight shake of her head.

It's easy for you to say no, he thought. I've been like a gutless rabbit ever since I first saw you. You said that you hated guns, so I put mine away. When Ben wanted to pin a deputy's badge on me, you argued me into saying no. Now he's shot up, maybe dying, and you want me to say no to him again. Yet you love Curly, a heller who wears guns and uses them on your own father. A man can take so much, Nan, and nothing more. I've had enough.

To Ben Blaine, Dave said, "Take it easy, old-timer. If people will have me, I'll take over your job."

Doc West opened the door. "Time's up," he said. "Ben needs plenty of rest."

Dave returned Nan's wide-eyed stare, put his back to her and left the room. Ledbetter still sat on the couch in the office. Dave stopped before him, saying.

"Ben wants me to run for sheriff. What

kind of chance do you think I'll have, Ralph?"

The settler jumped to his feet. Unconcealed joy lay across his craggy face as he pumped Dave's hand in his own horny palm. "You've got a fifty-fifty chance even now, late as it is. A square gunswift is Pine Gulch's only hope. I'm on my way to election headquarters to spread the word."

Chapter II

"COME AND GET IT, LAWDOG!"

DAVE FOUND little Billy sitting disconsolately on the plank walk outside the office. "Your daddy's going to be all right," he told the boy. "How about running down to the shop for me and telling Shorty to close up for the day?"

Billy scuttled away. Dave cut through a vacant lot into the street behind Main. Five minutes brought him to the Blaine home whose roof he had shared since his marriage to Nan. Ben's wife had died some years ago. Instead of moving into their own home, Nan had insisted on staying here and keeping house for her brother and father.

In their bedroom on the second floor of the rambling house, Dave pulled a small trunk from under the four-poster bed. It took him some time to wipe the grease off his cartridge belt and the bone-handled Colt .45. He buckled the belt around his lean waist, tied the holster tip to his leg. The feel of the heavy weapon against his thigh was comforting and familiar.

He tried his draw before the dresser mirror. He was all thumbs at first, no coordination between hands and mind. He kept trying, knowing it would come back. It did. Finally the long-barreled Colt came out of leather like a live thing at his touch.

Funny, he thought bitterly. Just thirty minutes takes me back three years. Back where I started from. Dave Gray, gunhawk, wears his guns again. Dave Gray, blacksmith and citizen, is gone forever.

He left the house, cut back into Main. Ledbetter had wasted no time in spreading the news that he was a candidate for sheriff, he saw. These people had always been watchful and reserved where he was concerned. Now some of them greeted him cordially, others eyed him stonily. All of them drew together in tight little huddles to talk about him after he strode past.

Dave stepped into the hardware store and bought several boxes of cartridges. He punched the brass loads into empty belt loops and inserted five of them in his gun cylinder, carefully leaving the firing pin on an empty. The clerk, a wide-eyed youth, stood behind the counter, gaping at him.

As Dave stepped onto the boardwalk, he

bumped into Ledbetter and several settler comrades.

"We tried to catch you at home," Ledbetter said. "Lucky for us you went in there."

Dave said, "Why?"

Ledbetter met his cold, level gaze. "Nan said you were going after your brother. She asked me to stop you."

"This is personal," Dave said, wondering how Nan had guessed his intentions. "Just Curly and me."

"You wouldn't shoot him—saying you managed to beat his draw?" asked Ledbetter. "Not your own brother?"

"That," said Dave frostily, "is none of your business."

Ledbetter's face reddened. "Sorry. It's the pool I'm thinking about. You jump Curly, you're jumping the pool. Most of that outfit is still in the Paradise, drinking and raising hell. You'd never leave the place alive, Gray. Max Arnold would see to that. If you're going in, we're going with you."

Dave studied the lanky settler's logic and found it good. In the heat of his own personal anger at Curly, he'd neglected to figure all the angles to this affair.

"Reckon I'm being too hasty," he admitted. "Bracing Curly now wouldn't settle any part of this. I'll wait and see how the election comes out."

THEY COUNTED the ballots at sundown. Dave edged out Hoke Yancey by a narrow margin. He found himself being congratulated upon all sides. It was a funny feeling. A town councilman unconsciously put their attitude into words.

"Excusin' my bluntness, son," he murmured, pinning the shiny star on Dave's shirt pocket, "but any stranger would say this town had gone loco. Appointin' you to fill Blaine's unexpired term and electin' you to a full term after that. Many a man that ought to know, says Curly Gray ain't one-half as mean as you can be when you get started. I hope you treat this badge right."

Dave stared coldly at the circle of business men crowded into the sheriff's office in the courthouse. These were the solid citizens, the decent folk who frowned on him and his kind, yet put him into office to serve their own selfish ends.

"I've got my own ideas about wearing a badge," he said so all could hear. "I'll tolerate no interference. If that doesn't suit you, you'd better call it off right now."

"No, no," the pudgy councilman said hastily. "It's no news to any of us that Ben Blaine wanted to turn the job over to you for a long time. If Ben swears by you, so do we. We need a hard man to bring peace to the valley. We couldn't have made a better choice."

"Thanks." Dave's voice was sarcastic. "I'll try to justify your faith in me. If I don't stop a bullet, I'll clean up this mess—my way!" He settled in the rickety swivel chair behind a paper-littered, flat-topped desk. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll get down to work. Ralph Ledbetter's in the courthouse somewhere. If anybody sees him, I'd appreciate your sending him here."

They straggled out into the corridor. Ledbetter soon made his appearance. Dave motioned him to a seat.

"In a few minutes," he said, "I'm walking into the Paradise and arresting Curly. I can't let him get away with Ben's shooting. The pool would try it again. I'm going to teach them to respect the law. How many armed men you got in town tonight?"

"Enough to meet the pool on even terms." In the yellow lamplight, the settler's angular face showed grim as carved stone. "Is this the showdown?"

"I don't know and I don't care!" As in the past, Dave felt black, turbulent tides loosed within him at the prospect of trouble. "I've fought in range wars, mister. Several of them. I know how fast they can start. If we play it right, maybe we can stop this one tonight."

Ledbetter eyed Dave oddly. He listened to the new sheriff's plan and nodded his head in agreement. A few minutes later, he slipped out of the room.

Dave turned out the light, slumped back in the swivel chair and stared into the darkness. I've done it, he thought morosely. I've thrown away everything. These people think Curly's a mighty bad hombre. What will they think of me? I fought it. I had it licked. I'll never be able to do it again. I'm crazy to let them pull me into this mess. I ought to go straight to the shop and saddle my horse and light a shuck out of here. Only I won't—because it won't let me.

The courthouse occupied most of the square at the upper end of Main. The county jail squatted directly across the street. Picking up the ring of keys from his desk, Dave locked his office. The jail boasted no jailer. Through local custom, Hoke Yancey, town marshal, conducted his affairs from the tiny office in the front part of the adobe building. Dave had not expected to find Yancey at his desk, nor was he disappointed.

He looked in the cell block and found it empty. He examined the racked arsenal on the wall. He found a pair of handcuffs on the desk top and slipped them into his hip pocket. Once more he examined his gun and tested its hang in the oiled holster. Satisfied, he turned down the lamp-wick, locked the door and strode down Main.

He came opposite Doc West's office. Yellow lamplight spilled through the front window.

An oblong shaft of light caught him as the office door opened, winked out as it closed. Then Nan was there before him, barring his way.

She said, "Don't do it, Dave. You'll be killed. Curly isn't worth it."

"Do what?" he asked testily.

"Arrest Curly. You needn't pretend. Everybody knows what your first move as sheriff will be. The whole town is watching. The pool is waiting for you. They've made their brags. They're out to get you, Dave."

He said, "You'd rather I show yellow? That I treat Ben's star like that? The news would kill him." Her face was a pale blur in the shadowy street light. He bent closer so that he might see it. "Does Curly still mean that much to you?"

"No! I'm over that now." Her voice sounded strangled; he could barely hear her words. "I've been over it a long time—only I didn't know until today. It's—it's like awakening from a horrible dream."

"And Curly had to shoot up Ben to open your eyes," Dave snapped harshly, not caring if he hurt her. The old black tides pulsed inside him with increasing force. This talk only made him impatient to get on with his job.

"No!" she cried. "Listen, Dave. Curly came to the house to see me early this morning. I was alone. He'd been drinking. He wasn't the man I once knew. He—he's changed terribly. He wanted to take me away—leave this country. I refused. We quarreled. It was awful. Curly went off terribly angry. He signed on with the pool. You know the rest of it. . . ."

Suddenly she was in his arms. He held her close, letting her sob against his chest. For the first time since they'd been married, she fully shed the reserve in which she'd always cloaked herself. It gave him a taste of what their marriage could have been and he was thankful for it.

Dave said, "Curly always was a devil with the women. You're not the first one, Nan. But it's taken you longer to get over it. I'm glad you told me." He pushed her away from him. "I've got to go now. I'm late. If I come back, we'll talk things over. Maybe we can straighten it all out."

"I can't stop you," she said dully. "I knew I couldn't but I had to try. God help you, Dave! There's nothing to straighten out. I'll be praying that you come back to me, Dave."

He didn't kiss her. He didn't dare to. He strode on down the street toward the Paradise, carrying the picture of her lovely, stricken face with him.

THE PARADISE sported one of the few false fronts along Main. As Dave approached the saloon, he saw a man climb off

a bench under the overhang and scuttle inside. A pool lookout.

Dave paused in front of the place. The sound of drunken revelry blared through the open door and windows. For an outfit that had just lost an election, the pool was doing all right.

Ralph Ledbetter's lanky figure materialized from the gloom of an empty doorway, drifted past Dave. "Everything's set," he muttered in a low voice. He continued his aimless stroll along the street.

Dave sensed movement all around him. The shadows must be alive with armed settlers and hired guns but he could not see them. It was an eerie feeling.

He shrugged it off, pushed his way through the batwing doors.

The long bar across the rear wall was packed with men. The gaming table to his left was crowded. The poker tables on his right hummed with the clatter of chips, the hubbub of low tense voices. A gray haze of tobacco smoke clouded the huge room. The smell of strong whiskey and leather and sweat pressed against him, arousing old and slumbering memories.

His entrance brought a sudden cessation of all activity in the saloon. Every man there deliberately turned to stare at him. If the pool figured on scaring him, they soon realized their mistake. His cold black eyes measured the room with contemptuous indifference. Most of the pool riders broke under that stare and turned uneasily back to their games and drinks. But the death-like silence held.

The pool men covertly eyed the two famous Gray brothers, wondering what would happen now that they rode opposite sides of the fence.

In the past, people had always taken them to be twins. Nobody would make that mistake now, Dave thought, as he spotted Curly at the bar. Curly's elbows were propped on the mahogany behind him. He held a half-empty glass in one hand. A curious, speculative gleam danced in his bloodshot eyes.

"Howdy, lawdog," he said thickly, a semblance of a smile breaking over his bloated face. "I've been waiting for you to drop by and welcome me back to town."

They had never met like this before. Dave felt a sudden sickness at what he must do, then felt the sickness swallowed up by the turgid anger inside him. Curly had long since forfeited all rights to brotherly consideration. The ties that once bound them together had vanished.

"Jail," said Dave, moving forward, "is your welcome. Why did you come back, Curly? You knew what would happen."

Curly laughed hollowly. "Don't crowd me, Dave. You saw what happened to old Blaine. Don't make me pull on you too."

Dave kept closing the distance between them. "Answer me," he said. "Why did you come back?"

"You know." Curly's voice mocked him. "I can see it. Nan told you. She's mine, Dave. I had first claim on her. That's why I came back. She's in love with me."

Every man in the crowded room heard him. Dave came to a sudden halt, unable to believe his ears. The old Curly would never have slandered any woman, either in private or public. This Curly had just given evidence of the mental degradation that claimed him, by breaking one of the inviolable rules of this country—not to sully the name of a good woman in public.

"You're lying, Curly! You're going to eat those words." Dave felt like a tight-wound spring whose sudden release was long overdue. The temper inside him had become a giant, and that giant cried out for action. Again Dave moved toward his brother.

Curly raised his glass, downed the raw whiskey at one gulp. His hand came down, smashing the empty glass upon the floor. His other hand streaked for one of the notched gunbutts at his lean hips.

He never got the gun out of leather.

Dave's solid weight smashed into him, pinning him against the bar with a jarring force that rattled the glassware all along the mahogany. Dave's long muscular arms encircled his brother's body and arms. He braced himself on wide-spread legs. His shirt ripped open under the pressure of swelling muscles as he heaved. Curly sprawled his full length on the dirty floor, rolled over twice before he regained his balance.

He got to one elbow, stared blankly up at Dave who stood over him. The pool men eyed the pair unbelievably. Both of these brothers bore enviable reputations, yet the pool had figured they had the tougher of the two on their side. Now, looking at the big, hard-eyed man with the star on his shirt, they weren't so sure.

"Forget the guns!" snapped Dave. "Don't make me shoot you."

Amazement flooded Curly's eyes, as if he'd just discovered that he was on the floor. "Fists, eh!" he drawled, getting to his feet. "Bueno, if that's the way you want it."

The fight that the pool men saw that night was a topic of conversation for years to come. Those two six-foot-plus giants slugged it out. Face to face and arms' length apart, they stood on braced legs, giving and taking vicious jolting blows that would have torn an ordinary man apart.

DAVE HAD never met a man who could take the punishment in his fists. He had never had a fight with his brother until now.

Curly, he found, was that same rare combination as himself—a combination of whang-leather sinews, limitless strength, and the Devil. But Curly lacked one thing—the black ravening temper that always possessed Dave at moments like this, robbing his brain of all reason, filling him with the demoniac impulse to murder and destroy.

This was the thing that he had conquered in the past three years, the thing that was loosed at flood tide inside him now. It gave him the extra strength, the finer timing, the merciless savagery that sent Curly down upon one knee, swaying like a stricken oak.

Curly tried to get up, couldn't make it. He sat down heavily, a wondering look in his pain glazed eyes. Blood trickled from both corners of his mouth. He'd lost his hat and his curly black hair hung down over his swelling eyes. His labored breathing made a rasping sound in the tomb-like silence of the saloon. Mechanically, he raised a grimy hand and tenderly felt of his bruised and bleeding face.

Dave said, "Tell them you lied. About Nan. Tell them!"

The beating had sobered Curly. "Sure I lied," he mumbled. "I came back for her but she wouldn't have none of me. She kicked me out of the house. I—"

He tugged at a sixgun. It was jammed in the holster. He tried for his other gun just as Dave's boot caught him behind the ear. He slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Dave knew he'd been roughed up plenty himself. His lips were smashed, he tasted blood in his mouth. Every movement of his throbbing body drew twinges of pain from battered flesh. He wiped a tattered shirt sleeve across his sweaty face, put his back to the bar and faced the circle of silent, shocked men, hemming him in.

"He goes to jail," Dave said softly. "After this, anybody comes to town, he checks his guns at my office. There'll be no more reckless shooting. Does anyone want to argue the matter?"

The words touched each of them, yet the new sheriff made it a personal issue by staring directly at Max Arnold and his two partners, Pike Storey and Jake Miessner. They still sat at the glass-strewn table from which they had seen the fight.

Arnold, a squat, denim-clad man, scowled darkly, leaned over to whisper something into the ear of the fourth man at the table, Hoke Yancey. Yancey nodded drunkenly, took another gulp of whiskey from his full glass, and pushed his chair back. He swayed to his feet, a tall, cadaverous man dressed in black. Hands on gunbutts, he crossed the open floor with the careful dignity of a man who knows he has had too much to drink.

"Gray," he sneered, "the county's yours to

run. The town is mine. I'm still marshal. Nobody ever needed to check their guns before this. And they don't have to now on your say-so. You want to make something of it?"

The fury inside Dave flared up anew. He took a long stride forward. His bunched fingers came up from his boot tops and exploded in Yancey's face. The marshal hit the floor on his back, bounced, came up to a sitting position. He got to his feet, his gun drawn and leveling at the big sheriff.

The swirling mists stirred to a new frenzy in Dave's brain. He'd tried to avoid gunplay. Now it was Yancey or himself. He didn't remember drawing his .45 but it was there, thundering and bucking in his hand. Tongues of flame lashed from the long muzzle, his slugs smashing Yancey back onto the floor. The marshal's bullets tore harmlessly into the ceiling. Then the heavy weapon slipped out of his lifeless hands.

"That was reckless shooting!" Dave snapped. "Anybody else want to commit suicide tonight?"

Max Arnold nodded his bulldog head imperceptibly. The pool men saw the command, began to close in. Hands slid down to gunbutts. Purpose glinted flint-hard on that circle of grim faces.

Where in hell was Ralph Ledbetter, Dave wondered desperately. The settler and his allies were supposed to barge in here at this moment. That was the way Dave had planned this thing; it was the only chance he had to succeed.

"Hold it, pool! We've got you covered!" Ledbetter's voice sounded in crisp command. Dave drew a long, deep breath, feeling the relief of the moment seep through him. The man was solid, dependable, and for that he was thankful.

Dave saw indecision warp the circle of faces. Stooping, he scooped up Curly's limp figure and lifted it over his shoulder. He faced them, gun in hand.

"I'm coming through. Curly goes to jail. If I don't get you from the front, somebody will from behind. Out of my way, now."

They scattered before him, uncertainty marking their faces and their movements. He was halfway to the front door when Max Arnold's rasping voice fused them into a solid, menacing enemy.

"Don't let him through, boys! This is a showdown! Blast Gray down! Get every nester you can!"

It turned into a nightmare of smoking, spitting guns and milling, shadowy men. Dave aimed his lead at the ornate lamps over the bar, watched the lights snuff out as if a giant hand had suddenly doused them. At the front door and windows, and from the storeroom in the rear, the settler marksmen picked out

the remaining lamps, leaving the Paradise in deep gloom.

Dave felt the burning lacework of bullets about him. Somehow he made it through the batwings without feeling the bite of a slug, still carrying Curly's limp body over his shoulder. Out there in the street, he intended taking over command of the besiegers. A look at his brother in the flickering light of a nearby streetlight changed his mind.

Curly had taken a bullet in the chest. Crim-son bubbled and spread upon his shirt-front. Dave knew he had to get him to a doctor at once.

Chapter III

RANGE HOG'S HOSTAGE

THE LANKY Ledbetter slid into the shadowy doorway beside Dave. "We can't hold them long," he said. "My men don't have the heart for this sort of thing. Our hired guns can't carry the fight to the pool. There aren't enough of them. You'd better get out there and stop it."

Realization of what he had done had swept the temper out of Dave's brain. The grief that replaced it was a cold hard lump in his chest.

"To hell with the lot of you!" he bit out savagely. "Curly's hurt—maybe dying. I'm taking him to Doc West. Then I'll come back. I'll talk to the pool—if you can hold them that long."

"But you promised!" Ledbetter's hand twisted in the tattered front of Dave's shirt. "You promised to stop it once we got you out of there! Remember? My men aren't gun-fighters—they'll be killed! You'll have their blood on your hands, Gray. This was your idea!"

Dave struck the clinging hand away. "Getting Curly shot up wasn't part of it," he said thickly, torn between his duty to the settlers and his blood obligation to his brother. Yet already he was placing Curly in the doorway. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

He never got the chance. The rattle of gunfire inside the Paradise flared to new heights. That of the besiegers weakened, choked off as fright laid a clammy hand over the settlers. The pool had found a weak spot in the ambushade. It was all they needed. Whooping madly, shooting at anything that moved in their path, the pool men poured out into the street.

"Too late now," Dave muttered, pulling Ledbetter back into the shelter of the door. "Your men are scattering. There's nothing we can do."

They hugged the shadows, watching pool men swing up into leather and send boogered horseflesh thundering wildly along the street.

Guns crashed, store windows shattered, exultant yells reverberated up and down the silent streets. Several times, pool men sent their mounts the length of Main, defying the town to stop them. Finally they rode out of town.

Gently, Dave picked up Curly's limp form. "You go count noses," he told Ledbetter. "I'll be at the doc's office. We'll talk this thing over there."

Doc West's office looked like a cyclone had struck it. Lamplight poured through the open front door as Dave stepped upon the little porch, carrying his burden. He swept the scene with burning eyes. The carpet was rumpled, the couch sat awry. The medico lay sprawled before the closed bedroom door. There was no sign of Nan.

Placing Curly on the couch, Dave stooped over the unconscious doctor. A purplish bump marred his balding head where someone had laid a gun barrel against his skull. A few dippers of water from the bucket hanging in the corner brought him out of his coma, gasping and sputtering.

Recognition flared in his eyes at sight of Dave. "I—I tried to stop them," he said weakly. "Miss Nan was sitting up with Ben. I feared for his safety. They didn't touch him. They laid hands on the girl. Both of us fought. They drug her into this room. I followed, trying to stop them. Then all went black." He stared wide-eyed at Dave's harsh face, seeing the hell that glowed in those black eyes. "You did—didn't get here in time?"

"By they," said Dave, "I take it you mean the pool? No, they were gone when I got here. So's Nan. They'll wish they'd never touched her, Doc. You recognize any of them?"

"Yes. Max Arnold directed them. He didn't enter into it. The others were his men. I've seen them around but I don't know their names."

Dave said, "The others don't count. Only Arnold."

He helped West to his feet, pointed toward the couch. "My brother took a bullet. He's bleeding bad, Doc. See what you can do."

They stripped Curly down to the waist. The slug had entered his back, passed through him at an angle, leaving an ugly hole in his left breast when it emerged. After his examination, the little medico slowly shook his head.

"Punctured lung," he muttered. "Bullet may have scraped his heart. He won't see sunrise tomorrow. I'm sorry, Dave." He opened a medical chest, began pulling out instruments and bandages. "I'll make him as comfortable as I can. He might rally enough to talk before the end."

Curly did. Dave was out on the front porch, talking to Ralph Ledbetter and a group of settlers, when West came to the door and summoned him. He hurried inside.

Pain and knowledge of approaching death had erased much of the hardness from Curly's face. A faint smile rimmed his bloodless lips as Dave's hand closed over his own limp fingers.

"I got it, Dave," he whispered weakly. "That bullet was overdue. Funny, I always was scared of dying. This ain't bad at all. It's like the end of a long nightmare. I never was cut out to be no badman anyway." Then wistfully, "You licked it, Dave. I had the same chance. If only I'd stayed here with you. . . ."

"Things would be different." Dave blinked away the moisture that filled his eyes, suddenly finding it easy to forgive his brother many things that he had condemned him for these past three years. "You'd have Nan. She loved you. She turned to me, trying to forget you."

"Nan!" It was as if some forgotten chapter of Curly's recent life had abruptly opened for him. Fear grew in his eyes. He struggled to sit up, didn't have the strength. "I'm in the doc's office, ain't I? Nan's here, too. Tell me, Dave! They didn't get her, did they?"

"Arnold did. She's gone, Curly. What's behind it? Do you know?"

Bitter memory blanketed Curly's pale face. "I ought to," he whispered hollowly. "It was my idea. I wanted her—and I didn't care how. Max Arnold liked the idea, too. He figured on gunning you down when you came looking for her. He's your man, Dave. Miessner and Storey don't count. They've got families and they're for leaving the nesters alone. Stop Arnold, and you've stopped the pool."

"I'll be looking him up," murmured Dave. "Where did he take her?"

"To pool headquarters. Don't let him keep her there, Dave. It isn't safe. Promise me you won't let him keep her. . . ."

Curly never got an answer. His head rolled limply to one side. Dave pulled a blanket over the still form. Turning, he strode out the door and onto the porch.

A LOT of townsmen had joined the settlers now, among them the councilmen who had pinned the badge on Dave earlier in the evening. Their pudgy spokesman, Cassidy the banker, pressed forward, spattering,

"Everybody's laughing, Gray. The pool has made you look silly. You had them penned up like sheep and you let them get away. There's talk that Arnold rode out of town, taking your wife with him. Maybe we picked the wrong man. Maybe—"

Dave put the flat of his hand against the man's white shirt-front and shoved. Cassidy squalled his fear as he tumbled off the low porch and sprawled on the ground, the breath knocked out of him.

"I told you I'd clean up this mess," Dave said impersonally, including them all in his

cold eyed stare. "My way! First, I had to give the pool enough rope to hang itself. It did. I can slap almost every charge in the books at Max Arnold. I've got to track him down first. I don't think his saddlehands will be idle. Ledbetter, what would you do if you were in Arnold's shoes tonight? If you wanted to rid yourself of a bunch of troublesome nesters?"

The lanky settler said, "I'd burn them out. Just to make sure of the job, I might even dynamite their dam."

"Exactly," answered Dave. "I'll lay odds that the pool is on its way to your farms right now. You got any guards posted back there?"

Ledbetter muttered, "None. Our only hope lay in swinging the election. We brought in every man."

"Then hit leather," warned Dave. "Leave your women and children here in town. They'll be cared for. Get back to your farms as fast as you can. Send a party up to watch your dam. And God help you if you don't show more guts than you did tonight."

An excited, uneasy murmur stirred over the settlers. They began breaking up, heading for buggies and wagons and saddle horses even before Ledbetter's cry rolled over them.

"Get for home, boys! The sheriff thinks we're yellow! Here's your chance to show him some guts he hasn't seen! The guts that this country doesn't think we got!"

And in a lower voice to Dave, "By your standards, they're not fighters. But they'll fight for their homes. Down to the last shell and the last man. You'll see."

"They'll get their test," said Dave. "I'm riding the other way—to pool headquarters. I may be able to pull them off of you. I'll do my best."

"How?"

Dave didn't answer the settler's question. He stepped off the porch and lost himself in the spreading throng that covered the street.

Dave had never been one to punish a horse. But this night he pushed his big black gelding to the limit, feeling the bitter grief inside him run out with the miles. The black was heaving, its ebony hide covered with foam and sweat, when the myriad buildings that comprised pool headquarters loomed in the western sky. The time, he judged, was close to midnight.

Past visits had left him with an accurate knowledge of the pool layout. Each pool co-owner lived in a huge white house on the lip of the shallow basin that held most of the ranch utility buildings. Those three residences blazed with lights now; the rambling bunk-house below them was dark.

To Dave, that fact was significant. It proved that the pool saddlehands had not turned in for the night. If they were prowling

the valley, there was only one logical reason for them to be doing so. They were raiding the settler farms as he'd guessed they would.

He ground-reined the winded black in the gloom of the big barn in the center of the basin. Sliding out of saddle, he loosened the cinches and wiped the horse down with an old gunnysack he found on a corral fence. As far as he could tell, the pool was unguarded.

He spotted a lantern inside the barn, put a match to the wick and continued his investigation. The place smelled of hay and harness and horses. Half a dozen big draft mules were tethered in stalls. Untying the rope halters, Dave led the animals outside and freed them. He took care that the corrals about the barn were empty of livestock before going back into the building.

Taking a can of kerosene from the harness room, he circled the barn, dousing a generous quantity of the fuel on the warped, tinder-dry wall boards. His second trip around left a trail of burned matches and a series of growing, licking flames.

"She's going to be some bonfire," he muttered, hurrying outside and taking the black's reins. "The loft's full of dry hay. Those pool hands are bound to see it. If it don't pull them off the nesters, I reckon nothing will."

Fingers of flame had crept through the barn walls and were creeping upward when Dave paused at the worn hitchrack at the foot of the slope leading up to Max Arnold's white house. Knotting the reins about the rail, he glided uphill, making it noiseless and fast, knowing that the fire would be noticed any moment now.

Up on the rim he vaulted the low rail fence and crossed the ill-kept yard. Nan's shrill cry of terror sent him upon the gloomy porch with reckless drive. And for the second time this night, that black, unreasoning wrath possessed his brain.

HE SENSED danger as his hand tried the door knob and found it locked. Boots scraped on dry wood as he whirled, hands dipping to his gunbutts. Shadowy figures materialized on either side of him. Starlight glinted on metal as a voice rasped,

"You're covered, mister! Don't make us shoot. Just hold it right there till we get a look at you."

Nan's scream came again from somewhere inside the house. Dave tensed as one of his two captors chuckled coarsely, said, "The boss is entertainin'. You wouldn't be Dave Gray, would you? Max was mighty anxious that you didn't barge in on his party." A match flared in Dave's face. He didn't recognize the two men who held their guns on him. "Yeah, you're Gray. Max wants to see you—later."

To hell with you, Dave thought grimly. Nan's in there and God knows what's happen-

ing to her. I'm busting in and no two-bit gunnies will stop me.

The two guards seemed undecided about what to do with him. "I'll lift his guns," one of them muttered, moving forward. "We'll tie him up and hold him here."

"Look!" the other man bit out. "The barn! She's burnin'!"

"What!" said the man closing in on Dave. Turning his head for a quick glance was an involuntary gesture.

Dave's steel-thewed fingers wrapped around the man's gun-hand and weapon. He swung his brawny arm skyward, pointing the gun muzzle up. Like a puppet on a string, the pool guard was jerked in close against Dave's chest. He was whirled about like a baby, sent reeling into his comrade. The unfired gun fell out of his paralyzed fingers as he collided. The two men fell in a struggling, cursing heap.

Dave sprinted off the porch, headed for the rear entrance. Nan needed him. He had to get in the house. The thought drummed in his mind as he tried the back door. It was locked.

He backed away, came at the stout panel, putting all his weight behind his shoulder. It splintered, almost gave. He backed away and tried it again. The two guards rounded the corner of the house as he drove forward. He heard the report of a sixgun, felt a bullet zip past his head. The door shuddered, sagged inward this time.

Dave leaped over it, found himself in a kitchen. A Chinese cook cowered behind a big, wood-burning cookstove, jabbering in pidgin English. Ignoring him, Dave slid toward the front part of the house. Lamps glowed in the front rooms, but they were vacant. He came to a stop, pondering his next move. Nan's cry came from somewhere up in the second floor, choked off as if a hand had suddenly encircled her throat.

No lights shone through the gloom at the top of the stairs. Dave took the steps in great strides, feeling the scream of searching bullets. Arnold's two gun guards had entered the house and sighted him. He fought down the urge to draw his guns and return their fire. Too much time had been wasted already. It might be too late to save Nan. But he had to find her at once.

Up on the second level, he heard the sounds of a struggle—overturning furniture, the scrape of moving feet. The hallway was dark but light shafted out from under a door. Dave took three strides, found the door knob, jerked on it. The door swung open.

The room was a shambles. Chairs were overturned, the desk pulled away from the wall. Only the wall lamp seemed untouched. The two struggling figures turned at Dave's entrance, broke apart.

Nan—and Max Arnold. Nan's face was

contorted with fear. Arnold's bulldog face twisted in drunken fury as he turned on Dave. His hand scooped a sixgun out of leather, came up leveling it. A tongue of flame leaped from the muzzle.

Drawing his gun and triggering it were unconscious moves on Dave's part. He felt lead burn across his ribs. He saw Arnold stiffen and clutch at the black hole that appeared over his heart.

Slugs hammered at Dave from the doorway behind him. He spun around, caught one of the pool gunswifts in his sights. The man went down, but not before his lead hammered Dave to his knees.

It all became a vague nightmare. The other gunny was inside the room, throwing lead. Nan was there beside Dave, pulling a gun out of his limp fingers. He remembered seeing orange flame spurt from the gun in her hands. Then all went blank. . . .

He came out of the coma to find Nan bending over him. He knew he hadn't been unconscious long. The mingled reek of black gunpowder and fresh blood stung his nostrils. Pain hammered at his head. He raised an unsteady hand and felt the bandage over his right temple.

"It was close, Dave," she said softly. "Another inch—and you wouldn't be alive."

They were still in Arnold's office, Dave saw. She had turned out the lamp but a flickering red light poured through the windows, illuminating the room with an eerie brightness. Max Arnold still lay on the floor beside the desk. The two gun guards were motionless heaps before the door.

"I got Arnold—and another gent," said Dave. "What happened to the other one?"

Nan said, "He would have shot you. I thought he did. I—I went crazy for a moment. I killed him with your gun."

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "The fire will bring the pool back here, pronto. I hope it isn't already too late."

STRENGTH was seeping back into Dave's muscles. Taking Nan's hand in his own, he led her downstairs. Unbarring the front door, they paused on the porch. In the distance, the blazing barn lay engulfed with flames. Every inch of the basin floor was clearly visible. Sparks had ignited some of the small buildings about the doomed stable. The pole corrals were beginning to smoulder.

"We'll never make it," said Dave, watching the dark patch of horsemen pour down the opposite slope far across the basin. "Quick, Nan. Over to the Miessner place. I see womenfolk on the porch. You'll be safe there."

Turning, he strode down the slope, shutting his ears to Nan's low cry. There was nothing

left but bluff. He wondered if one lone man could bluff the pool—standing in the heat of the barn he had destroyed. He doubted it. Not after the events of this day and night.

Pool saddlehands lit down out of leather and ran for water. They formed a bucket brigade between the windmill tank and the flames. Some of them took wet gunnysacks and beat out the smouldering fire that was spreading to corrals and nearby buildings. Dave climbed up on a corral fence and calmly watched their efforts. He rolled and smoked several cigarettes before they had things under control.

Miessner and Storey came toward him then. Both were lean, lanky men, their denim clothes charred and dirty, their sweaty faces streaked with soot. Dave slid off the fence to face them.

"Arnold's dead," he said. "I had to kill him. Tell me, misters, why did you ride off tonight, leaving my wife alone with him?"

They stared blankly at him. "Alone!" echoed Storey. "We didn't know, Gray. Grabbing her in town was Arnold's idea. It was none of ours. We busted up over it on the way home. Jake and me's wanted to buy Max out for a long time. We didn't like this nester deal from the start. There's room for everybody in the valley. We laid it on the line to Max in his house tonight. He didn't like it none but there was nothin' he could do. When the excitement died down, we learned he'd sent most of our hands to burn the nesters out. We fogged out after them, aiming to stop it. We didn't make it. Our boys had got to three-four nester shacks. Then we saw flames comin' from over here. We rounded up all hands and headed back pronto. You know the rest."

"Except one thing." The rage stirred restlessly inside Dave again. "You knew my wife was helpless in Arnold's hands. How come you to ride off before you knew she was safe with your own womenfolk?"

New sweat rolled off Jake Miessner's rugged face. "We clean forgot about her," he admitted. "Go ahead and shoot us, Gray. If you figger that'll even things. I ain't goin' to match guns with you."

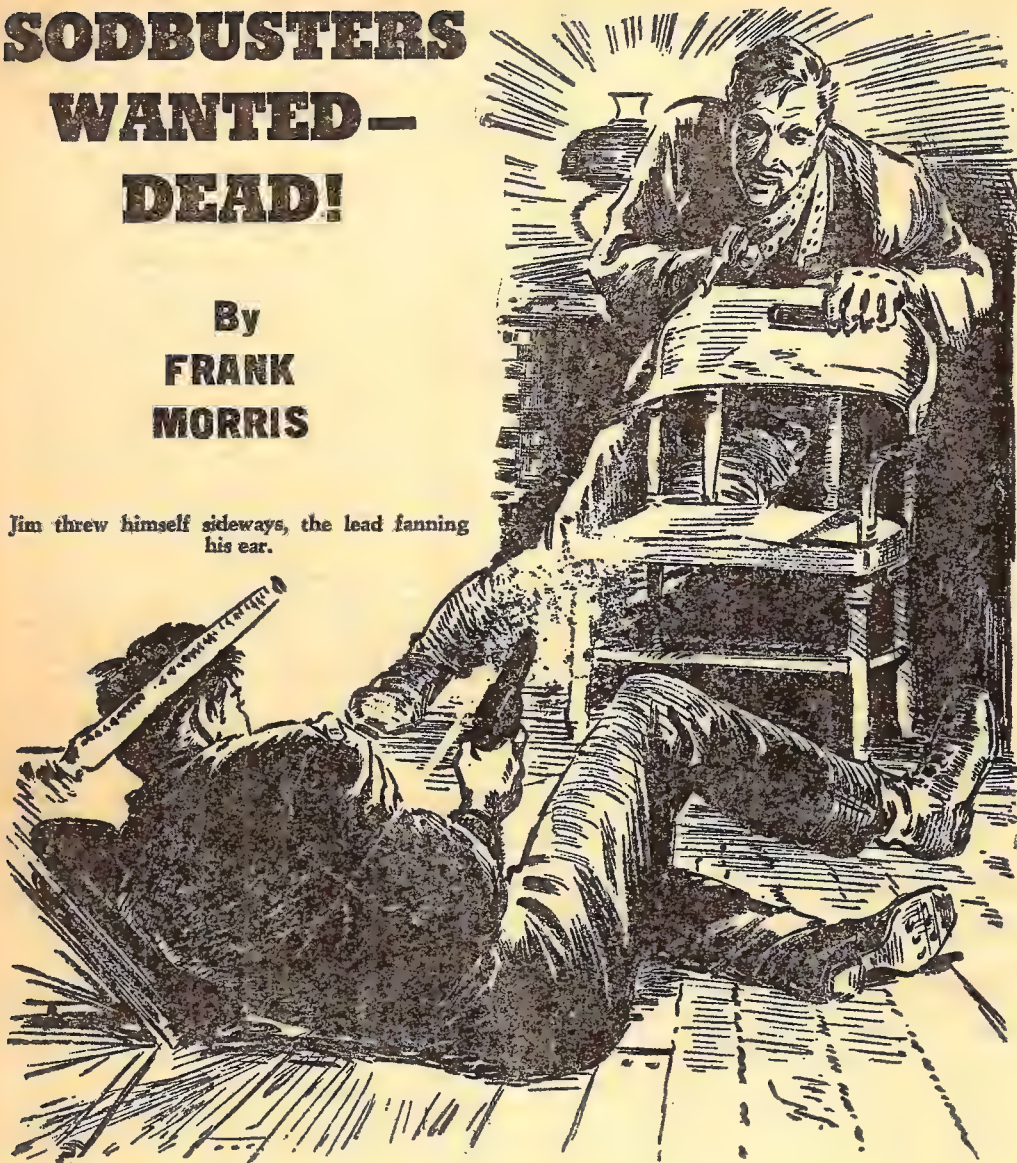
Their honesty was apparent. "Forget it," said Dave, feeling a new calmness sweep the dark tides aside. "The valley's had enough trouble. Maybe tonight has settled it. You want peace. That's all Ledbetter and his friends have ever wanted. Be in town tomorrow. The settlers will be there too. We'll patch things up."

Dave wheeled, took long hurried strides up the slope, feeling the strange peace within himself. Nan waited for him up there. She loved him. She'd said so. They understood each other now. They'd both share the new contentment that was coming to the valley.

SODBUSTERS WANTED— DEAD!

By
**FRANK
MORRIS**

Jim threw himself sideways, the lead fanning his ear.



The silent company of Boothill ghosts prepared to welcome Jim Bradley when that gun-shy fighting man hit the trail to a sodbuster's showdown. For they knew that a pair of iron-hard fists and a warrior's heart make a mighty sorry showing when stacked against snarling .45 slugs!

BRADLEY saw them coming as he made for the house with the evening's milk. A cold dread touched his gaunt, six-foot frame, and he hurried to place the foaming bucket beside the door of the little tarpapered shanty. He turned then, put his long back against the wall and smiled reassuringly at his wife's white face peering from the kitchen window.

Jim Bradley watched the two men ride into the yard and halt, and his gray eyes widened in surprise. It was Ross Dahl on that long-legged bay. Jim's big, work-worn hands were clenched by his sides, and his lips became a

thin gash under his nose. What was that sharp-faced land locator doing with a Cross rider?

Jim Bradley wasn't afraid—not for himself. A man bucking the uncertainties of homestead life on the raw edge of the Montana cow country had to expect trouble. But May and little Jimmy looked to him for protection. He was their buffer against want, against the coming lonely winter, against the hungry Assiniboiné Sioux who at times swept down like locusts on their meager supplies. Jim was a strong right arm against the grim vicissitudes of frontier life.

He was mighty little protection, though, he thought bitterly, in front of big tough Scotty MacLean's Cross-in-a-Circle outfit. An old .45-70 single-shot rifle wasn't going to scare off those gun-toting waddies.

DAHL SLUMPED in his saddle, threw a long leg over the horn and leaned forward. He grinned with his thin lips, winked briefly at his companion. He was a tall man, topping Jim by a good three inches. Well dressed in long gray, swallow-tail coat and tight fitting trousers, he had the air of a gambler about him—a city man. He pushed back the soft felt hat and put his hard green eyes on the homesteader.

"You still here, Bradley?" he greeted Jim. It was a question, but there was no trace of surprise in the angular features. It was more as though he had expected to find the homesteader on his flax farm, and was prepared for trouble.

"Yes," Jim said shortly, and watched the cowman gig his roan up beside the locator. This rider looked gunman to Jim. He shrugged. All of Scotty MacLean's men looked tough.

"Meet up with Lambert—Ord Lambert," Dahl introduced, and the smirking smile on his lips broadened gloatingly. "Ord's a new Cross rider. Goin' to put in the winter up at Scotty's line camp north of your tree claim—between old man Thompson's place and yours. He aims to see that you an' Thompson pull down them west line fences so's Scotty's cows can drift through the pass to the shelter along Redstone Creek this winter."

Jim's gray eyes puckered in his weathered face, and he put his wide shoulders up against the door. This was Scotty's threatened move. The cowman was going to crowd the settlers off the range. Jim had been expecting some such action, but had put it off, tried to reason out the folly of the thing. With all the big cowman's bluster and anger at the homesteaders for their hemming in of his sprawling range, Jim had hoped the man would not resort to violence. But here it was, right at his front door.

A surge of anger colored Jim's flat cheeks. He was a lean man, with wide-spaced eyes that

now held a cold, hard gleam. He was big-boned, with a farmer's slow, lumbering looseness, and the summer sun had burned its layers of tan smoothly over his face and neck. All his features were rugged, sharply chiseled.

"I'll not pull down my fences for MacLean's critters," he said hotly. "I told you that, Dahl, when I was in Willow Grove last week. I don't know what business it is of yours, but if you're frontin' for that range hog, you can tell him right now. I stay!"

Ord Lambert put a hand on his sixgun and cleared his throat.

"Better ear up, farmer," he rasped. "We ain't here to listen to your mad. We're tellin' you what to do."

Jim stared hot-eyed at the slender gunman. Lambert's face was partly hidden behind a two weeks growth of black stubble and his big, sweat-stained Stetson was pulled low over his pale unblinking eyes. He thrust his chin out belligerently, standing up stiff in the oxbows so that his holster swung free on his slim hip.

"I didn't think you'd pull 'em down," Ross Dahl said thinly, and ceased to smile. The arrogance that lurked in the lines around his mouth and in his eyes suddenly rode the tone of his voice. "That's why I'm payin' you a visit."

"Yeah?" Jim asked.

"Yeah," Dahl said and nodded his black head. "Either pull down them fences an' let MacLean's cows through—or git. You show fight, an' Scotty's red-head temper'll bust you clean to hell. That'll mean range war, an' you'll be blamed by the other settlers for bein' too stiff-necked an' selfish. You'll be the cause of it." Dahl glanced at the shack, saw the door open slowly and pretty golden-haired May Bradley step into view. Dahl looked back at Jim meaningly. "I'd hate to see bloodshed," he added.

"Better go back in the house," Jim said to his wife. "This—"

"All right, sodbuster!" Ord Lambert broke in roughly. He regarded Jim with hard eyes that held a bright glitter, and he flashed a quick glance at May. "We told you, an' you had your say." He reined his roan to Jim's side, crowded him up against the wall. May ducked back inside the house and closed the door. "But—if you hanker for trouble, you'll git it. Savvy?" Ord added insolently.

"I'll get a buyer, mebbe, for your place," Ross Dahl put in. "Could be Scotty'll buy it."

Jim grabbed the cheek-strap of the gunman's roan, jerked it. When the horse reared back, he ducked under and stepped to Dahl's gray, turning his back on the gun-hung stranger.

"Listen, Dahl," he snapped, "I've heard of your dirty methods. I know why you're sidin' MacLean—so's you can chouse me off my place, grab the vacated homestead for a dollar

an acre. Then you'll sell to MacLean. Well, if that cowman pays you, I'll have you both up in Federal court. That crooked stuff don't go. Now you take this killer an' clear off my place. Pronto!"

Suddenly there was a tinkle of broken glass. Ord Lambert turned in his saddle, his .45 half drawn as May Bradley poked Jim's old Army rifle through the window and blasted the hat from the gunman's head. May's voice, shrill with anger and fear, rang on the still evening air.

"You get out of here," she cried. "Right now—both of you."

Rage flashed in Ross Dahl's green eyes. He spun around.

"Come on, Ord," he snarled. "We've done all we can. We've warned him."

The two of them wheeled from the yard and vanished in the dusk.

THERE WAS a cold sweat on Jim's brow as he stalked in to his wife.

"May!" he jerked out, and then he was holding her slight form in his arms, and dabbing at the tears that ran down her smooth cheeks. "Don't take it so hard, girl," he said tenderly. "They can't chase us off our place. I'll see MacLean an' tell him what I think, you can bet."

"Oh, Jim—Jim," May sobbed, "they'll kill you. They'll drive us away from here."

"I may be a sodbuster, like that gunman said," Jim shook his head, "but I ain't a dummy. Give me that rifle. There's no crooked landshark, or high-an'-mighty cowman, going to pull that sort of thing."

May shoved away from him, stared strangely at him a moment.

"It isn't MacLean," she said quickly.

"Not MacLean? What d'you mean?" Jim's voice held surprise.

"No, Jim. I'll admit Scotty MacLean is a rough man, greedy and all that. But he's not the kind of a man that'd push a family off their farm—in the Fall, before a Montana winter."

"He thinks he owns this land," Jim argued hotly.

"No."

"How'd you know?"

"He's big and he blusters, Jim," May said, "but at heart, I believe he's kind. That bluster is mostly a mask. I'm sure we can live here—even possibly become friends some day."

Jim scoffed at that, and tramped into the house for his box of cartridges. The heavy sound of his walking awakened his little two-year old son, and the baby cried out to him, gurgling and laughing. But Jim Bradley was too angry to stop and play with the kid as he always had done. He jammed on his flopprimmed hat and went back outside.

"I felt sorta the same way about MacLean,"

he told May, "before this evening. But what else can you call that warning he sent by Dahl? Sure, Dahl's got a crooked finger in this some place, an' I'm goin' to find out just what he's up to. But it's MacLean that's back of it."

"If you could let MacLean have passage through here, Jim," May persisted, "it would help him. At least during the winter. It wouldn't hurt the stubble field."

"An' come spring, when I put the fence back up, I'd have MacLean tell me that his cows have to water on Redstone Creek." Jim grunted and pulled savagely at his hatbrim. "No, May. We can't give in an inch. It's here an' now. I'm goin' up to see old man Thompson. He's in this as much as I am. Mebbe between us we can get word to the Government Land Office in Plentywood, or the Sheridan County sheriff."

Jim's square jaw was set, hard as granite. May knew the futility of trying to stop him now and stepped back through the doorway. Half-way to the sod-walled barn, Jim wheeled around and came back on his long legs to place the heavy rifle in her hands.

"You might need this—more'n I will," he said flatly, and then turned and trotted to the barn to get out the black gelding of his plow team. "We'll figger out a way," he called. "Don't you fret." Then he was lost in the gathering darkness.

* * *

Jim and old man Thompson didn't figure out a way. Jim slid from his bare-backed plow horse in front of Thompson's little sod shanty and knew that trouble had beat him there. The door was wide open. The place was dark, and Thompson's old white mare lay dead near the lean-to barn.

Jim stepped up onto the front stoop, stumbled, and almost fell over the old homesteader's body sprawled in the doorway. He got out his block of sulphur matches, and under the fitful yellow gleam saw the blood on the scrawny old back. Thompson was dead. The shack hadn't been disturbed, and there was nothing Jim could find to indicate who had killed the good-natured old farmer.

It was no longer a land fight. MacLean had made his play, and now it was murder. Jim's eyes were stony as he mounted his black, and a cold lump gathered in his belly. He was no gun-fighter. He was a farmer. His farmer's instinct was for peace, and it was calling to him now, urging him to head his horse toward home. Better to gather up his little family and make for town, than wait and be wiped out. Maybe killed like old man Thompson. At thirty, a man could start over again.

When this trouble first raised its ugly head, Jim Bradley had felt a wild seething anger. But that kind of anger soon burned itself out,

leaving the hardened clinkers of a fixed and stubborn purpose. The very nature of the man, the hard determination and dauntless spirit that had been behind his filing on the homestead, was not to be swamped by fear.

Jim rattled his brogans against the black's ribs and headed west toward Thompson's line fence. If that was cut, he'd have some proof that this was MacLean's move to oust the farmers from the pass. Maybe Lambert had done it, under orders from the Cross owner.

Not a strand of the tight fence had been cut. Jim rode the whole length of it, from the beginning on the north side of the pass down to where it joined his own fence on the tree claim. And there was no sign of Cross cattle near the fence.

Jim finally pulled to a halt, puzzled, remembering May's words about MacLean. Could he have been mistaken? Could Scotty MacLean be the tolerant cowman she believed him to be? Or was he the high-and-mighty cowman that Jim Bradley thought he was? Jim shook his head. The time or two he'd met and talked to the big red-headed Scot, MacLean seemed to have only contempt and harsh language for homesteaders—particularly for Thompson and himself, because their fences blocked him off on the east.

There was only one way to know for sure. He'd go to the source of the thing. He'd pull the old lion's whiskers. Jim swallowed a couple of times to get the lump back where it belonged, and to get a hold on himself. He'd have to reason this thing out, not rush into it headlong without considering what he was doing. It was one thing to talk about paying a visit to Scotty MacLean. It was quite another to ride toward the big Cross outfit with a chip on his shoulder—and no gun on his hip.

Jim found Thompson's gate and struck out through the pass. A half-hour later he topped the flat table-land that made headquarters for the Cross-in-a-Circle spread.

THE MOON was overhead now, a cold Fall moon that cast silver light over the prairie, the occasional clumps of cottonwoods, and the thickets of chokecherry in the ravines. Yellow lamplight spilled from the long, low bunkhouse, a dim substitute for the moonlight that lit up the corrals and cattle sheds.

Jim slid from his horse and walked forward slowly, to rap on the plank door of the bunkhouse. The sound was a hollow voice in the night and matched the pound of his heart.

A heavy cursing broke out inside, followed by the scrape of a chair and the dull thud of boots. Suddenly the door was jerked open, and big Scotty MacLean stood there surveying the lean blinking farmer. There was no welcome in the florid face, nor in the bright blue eyes that peered out from under shaggy red brows.

The cowman's huge bulk towered over Jim Bradley. The rancher's thick red beard seemed actually to curl with the savage temper flooding the red face.

"I've come to talk, MacLean," Jim opened. "I want—"

"Bradley!" Scotty exploded savagely. "Thought I told you hoemen never to set foot on this outfit—you an' that old fool, Thompson."

Jim eyed the rancher coldly. He expected trouble and braced himself for it, but he wouldn't make the first move. He'd come here to Scotty MacLean to settle this thing once and for all—peacefully if he could. He was armed only with words and his two good fists.

"Thompson's dead," he said flatly.

"Dead?" MacLean's heavy brows thrust out at Jim, and the red-headed Scot was suddenly still. One eyebrow lifted, opening that eye a little wider. The other became only a thin streak of light that glittered in the yellow lamplight.

Jim nodded. All at once he realized that this was the turning point. If Scotty believed him, he'd get cooperation. If the big Scot didn't believe him—

"Dead. Shot in the back. What do you know about it, MacLean—an where's that Ord Lambert gunny of yours?"

MacLean's pent-up breath came out, an explosive thunder. He turned to the half-dozen cowhands around the deal table in the center of the floor.

"Put up them guns, boys," he ordered. Then: "Come in, Bradley."

Jim stalked inside. His gray eyes circled the cowmen and came back to rest on the big rancher. Lambert wasn't among them.

"Now, sit down." MacLean waved a hand toward a box against the wall. "What about this man, Lambert? Seems like I heard tell of him—a gunman. But he don't work for me."

Jim remained standing. A man could move quicker that way, and to stand gave a man more confidence in himself. He wouldn't sit under the watchful eyes of this tough crew.

"That's what Ross Dahl told me, that he was on your payroll," Jim said. "He brought this Lambert out to my place just at dusk, told me I had to clear off an' tear down my fence. Lambert was, accordin' to Dahl, your north line-camp rider."

"A lie," roared MacLean. "Where is this gunman?" MacLean was on his feet now.

"That's what I'm askin' you," Jim said thinly.

"I sent an old homeguard, Slim Norton, up there to that linecamp. He's stoveup. I sorta pensioned him to that job for the winter," MacLean said roughly. "I sorta felt sorry for old Slim—"

"You felt sorry?" Jim scoffed.

MacLean bristled. "Aye. That's my right, farmer," he said in quick anger.

"Then this Slim Norton ought to be up there at your camp?" Jim asked. "Not this Ord Lambert?"

Jim watched the big Scot stare a moment at his cowhands, saw the sudden gleam that sprang into the big man's eyes.

"We'll find out," he said harshly. "You boys stay put. Me an' this grubhoe'll go up there pronto. Come on!" he roared.

MacLean brushed by Jim, stepped outside, and lumbered off toward the corral. In two minutes he was beside Jim on a big blaze-face sorrel, a sixgun on his wide hip and a Winchester in the saddle boot.

"If this is some of your dang farmer foolishness," MacLean warned, "you'll pay for it, Bradley. I asked you before to cut them fences across the pass, an' I been waitin', patient-like. You're gonna cut 'em, savvy. But I don't hold with no gunnies sayin' they work for me when they don't. We'll get to the bottom of this here Thompson killin'—then we'll talk about that fence cuttin'. But you'll cut it!" he added on a savage note. "I'll not be corraled by no grubhoes."

"I'm not tryin' to corral you," Jim said hotly. "That's my land. I raise flax on it—good flax. Fifteen bushels to the acre last summer. In the bottom land I cut the hay, stacked it. I'll not have your critters overrunnin' that land."

MacLean's blue eyes narrowed.

"Come on," he said gruffly.

THE TWO men, farmer and rancher, struck out east.

"To check on that there yarn of yours about old man Thompson," MacLean explained to Jim, as the homesteader tried to keep up with the cowman's big gelding. "It'd better be like you said—"

Scotty led the way after they had reached the line fence and wheeled onto Thompson's land. The shanty was still dark, as it had been when Jim stopped there, but with a difference.

Jim remembered he had left the door open, as he had found it, with old Thompson's body blocking the doorway. Now the door was closed. Jim slid from his lathered black, stood there waiting as MacLean wrenched an upright loose from the lean-to and began hammering on the door.

"You can save yourself that work," Jim said flatly. "Thompson's body was right there in the doorway when I was here. It's gone."

MacLean whirled around on his boots.

"Tryin' to crawl out now, huh?" he grunted, swinging savagely at the heavy door.

"No," Jim said, "and I can smell dirt."

"Dirt?" MacLean stared, and pushed back his big hat. "What you tryin' to pull now?"

"Just that, MacLean. I'm a farmer. I can smell fresh-turned sod or soil as far as I can see. And right now I smell fresh earth. Somebody's been diggin' around this place since I stopped here two-three hours ago."

"I thought sheepherders was crazy," MacLean grumbled, "but you hoemen've got them faded any day. Where at's this here dirt you're yowlin' about?"

Jim was slowly circling the little shanty now, his thin nostrils wide and quivering. Then he found what he was looking for—a low mound of freshly-turned earth about ten feet from Thompson's well. He searched through the short buffalo grass, found a long-handled shovel and began to dig away the earth. MacLean watched him, cursing softly at the farmer's foolishness.

But when Jim's shovel touched something solid, the rancher struck a match and held it over the hole. Two feet down old man Thompson's bony face stared up at him.

Scotty MacLean sucked in a quick breath. "That's him. Well, I'll be a dumb shorthorn, Bradley! You was talkin' straight, all right." He struck another light from the block of Norsky matches, and stared again at the wrinkled old face. He turned to Jim and his big face was heavy and serious. "This here, if it gets out, it'll throw this range into bloody hell."

Jim nodded and shoveled back some of the dirt. Then he poked the shovel into the soft mound and tied his handkerchief to the handle.

"So we can show the law," he said. "An' now, MacLean, let's see this Ord Lambert."

"I'll see him, all right, an' Ross Dahl will have to do some tall talkin'. That toadyin' parasite's been hangin' around my outfit, promisin' to get you an' Thompson out the pass. He said both of you was goin' to pull out—sell out. Offered to sell your two places to me for three dollars an acre."

"An' you agreed to buy?" Jim asked flatly.

"Not me! No, I ain't buyin' somethin' what's already mine."

They turned north for the Cross-in-a-Circle line camp, MacLean in the lead. They passed over Thompson's tree claim at the edge of the pass, followed along the creek through a silent cold night. There was no life, no sign of life. Only the chill promise of winter was with them, in the wind sweeping across the range, through the pass and up the shallow bottom land of the valley. There was moisture on the grass, a cold wetness that would turn to frost before sunup. Far to the west there was a sudden outbreak of coyote yapping, then all was still again until they came within sight of the small, sod-covered, windowless shack, the Cross line camp.

A thin spiral of smoke came from the canted stovepipe. Jim reined up and watched Mac-

Lean dismount. The rancher pulled his Winchester from the boot.

Jim slid to the ground. "You could loan me that six of yours, MacLean," he said.

"Loan you my six?" MacLean growled. "You go hide your head, soddy. This here is man's work."

"That's what I figgered," Jim answered, but the big Scot seemed not to hear the words. Jim trotted toward the cabin, ahead of MacLean. He'd show the cowman. Just because he was a farmer and didn't wear a gun and high-heeled boots didn't mean he wasn't as good as any lazy horsebacker.

At the doorway he halted. He had no weapon, not a thing but the pliers thonged to his overalls. He knew fear then. It wasn't plain foolhardiness that motivated him, but a desire to show this puffed-up rancher that even a farmer could be what the cowmen called "a man to ride the river with."

Scotty shouldered Jim aside at the door, shoved it open and stamped inside. The farmer followed, and both he and MacLean stopped there as Ord Lambert and Ross Dahl jumped up from a table that held bottle and glasses. The two wheeled around to face MacLean and Jim.

Dahl's little green eyes slitted. His mouth gaped. Lambert cursed hoarsely and crouched there behind the table.

"All right, Dahl, what you doin' here?" MacLean demanded.

Ross Dahl's thin lips stretched in a smile. "Why—Scotty, this is Ord Lambert. Slim Norton—"

"Norton quit," Lambert broke in. "Dahl said he'd fix it with you to put me on your payroll—hold down this line camp."

MacLean's bushy beard bristled like a dog's neck-hair.

"I seen your homely mug on a poster, feller," he rumbled. "You warn't usin' the same name, but Lambert, or whatever you call yourself, you ain't usin' this linecamp for a hide-out from the law. Where's Slim Norton?"

Jim spoke up then. "I smell fresh sod, MacLean," he said. "It's strong outside. I'll bet these two have killed Norton and buried him, like they done poor old Thompson."

"I don't smell sod," MacLean snapped. "I smell polecat. An' it's too strong for my nose." He flashed a look at Jim—a strangely friendly glance. He reached around with his left hand, shucked his six-shooter from leather and passed it over to the farmer.

"Uh—thanks," Jim said.

"Reckon I been somewhat of a dang fool," MacLean growled. "Anybody'd brace a pair like this without bein' heeled has got the sand needed for bein' a part of this here range. Yep, reckon it's you an' me, the cowmen an' the soddies, against snakes like this here gunny

an' that slimy townman there in them fancy duds."

Jim merely grinned at MacLean. "I guess—I reckon so," he nodded dryly.

JIM DIDN'T have time to cock the six-shooter, for at that moment Ord Lambert made his play for the .45 on his hip. His draw was a blur of swift motion. Ross Dahl leaped to one side, right hand stabbing for the spring holster under his left arm.

Gunfire and thunder filled the little shack. MacLean fired once, then his Winchester drooped and fell from his hands. The big rancher cried out, and crow-hopped backward, to fall out through the open doorway.

"Look out for Dahl," MacLean shouted from where he lay. "He's got a hide-out gun, Bradley."

Jim thumbed the six, saw red blossom and wet Dahl's shirt. Ross Dahl spun half around with the force of Jim's shooting, but he wasn't out of the fight. He twisted back, fired twice. Jim felt sharp pain in his left arm, high in his thigh. He stumbled, fell just as Lambert triggered again.

The slender outlaw dropped his gun after that and seemed to fold over. He grabbed at his stomach where MacLean's lead had sounded him and sprawled down beneath the table.

The smoke-filled shack whirled in front of Jim Bradley. There was no more pain, only shock and surprise for the farmer. He couldn't see MacLean, and struggled up on an elbow.

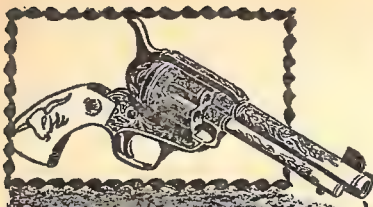
"Bradley, you sneakin' skunk!" Dahl belted, and grabbed a chair to keep himself erect. He shoved the chair before him, slowly closing the distance between them. Savage hate flamed in his green eyes, and the cords stood out on his long neck as he tried to lift and cock his six-shooter. He could hardly make it, swung his arm from the shoulder, managed to slide the gun over the back of the chair.

Jim saw that long gun barrel pointing at him and knew sudden worry for May and little Jimmy. He had to move, to roll out of the line of fire. He had to get back to the homestead. Cold sweat stood out on his lip as he willed himself up onto his knees.

He launched himself sideways as Dahl fired. The lead fanned his ear, slapped into the wall behind him. He pushed up on an elbow, and his own gun roared and bucked in his hand. Dahl stiffened, surprise on his wide mouth. Then he fell, to roll against the wall, booted feet beating feebly at the boards.

Jim got to his knees, pushed himself to his feet. He staggered outside, to sprawl full length over the groaning cowman on the front step. He tried to get up, but there was no more strength in him. He was still there,

(Continued on page 127)



FOR BULLETS, BOOTHILL



Stirring Novel of Sheep- Cowman War!

Crow River water turned red with the blood of a thousand stinking woollies when Ed McLain issued his grim gunsmoke invitation to his graze-hungry, river-raiding neighbor: "Sheeper, come and get your needin's!"

Chapter I

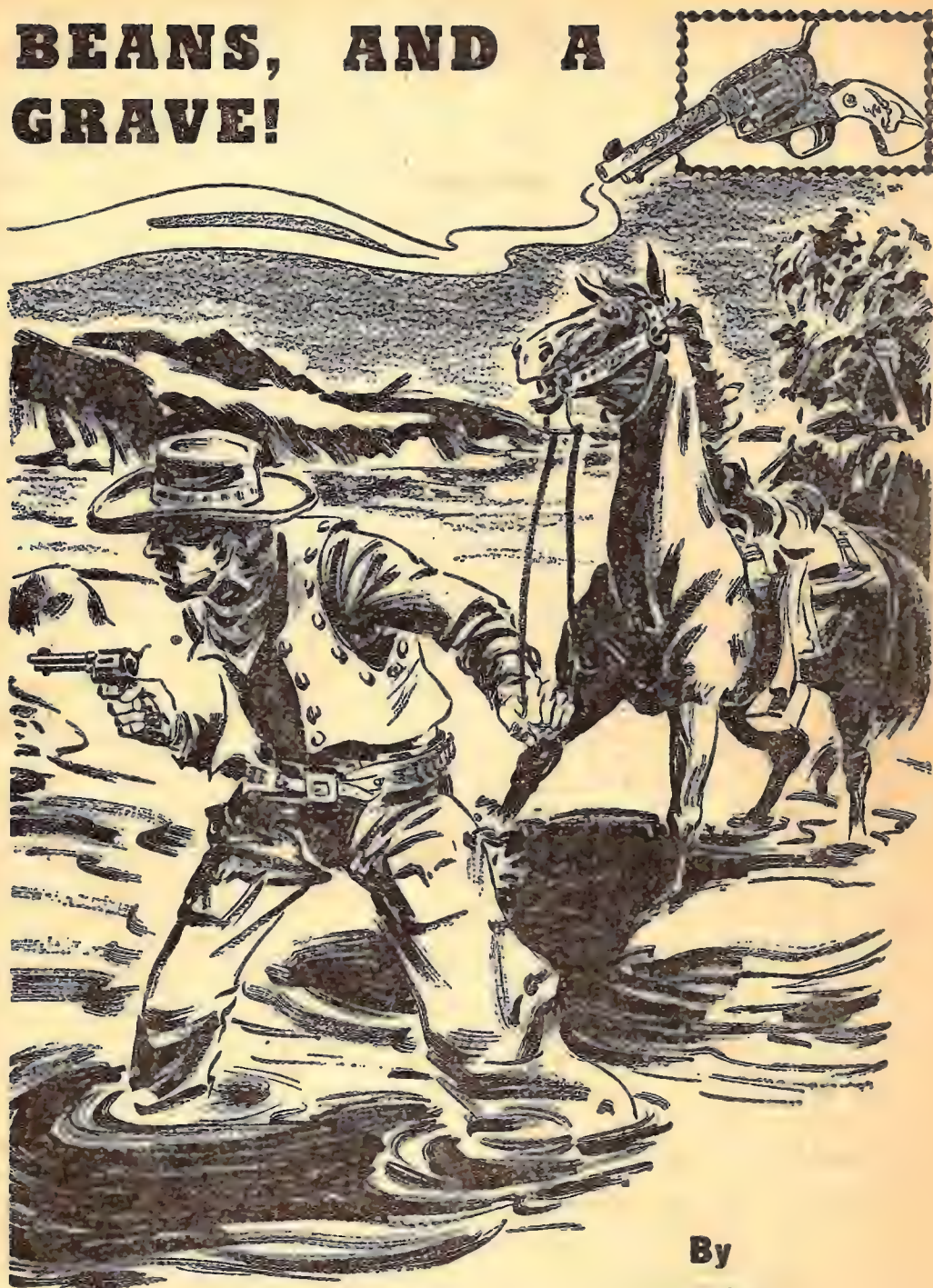
"SING A SONG OF SIXGUNS"

IT WAS a mournful little ditty, something he'd composed himself as he rode the lonely trails. It was a parody on a Mother Goose rhyme, and he hummed it half-aloud as he rode along the edge of the draw.

"Sing a song of sixguns,
A belly full of rye.
Five and twenty horse thieves
Swinging in the sky!"

He had no doubt it was the singing that

BEANS, AND A GRAVE!



Again Ed McLain roared,
"Come on, Morrell!"

By
**WILLIAM
HEUMAN**

frightened a man on a chestnut horse out of the draw and sent him spurring madly toward the east. He caught a glimpse of a black frock coat, and he noticed that the chestnut had three white stockings. He noticed these things because little things like that oftentimes meant the difference between life and death.

Ed McLain let the sorrel pick its own way down into the draw, but he kept both eyes open now, and his right hand close to the pearl handle of his big Colt. He still hummed his song, but he was slightly off key.

A gun banged off to his left and the slug kicked up dirt a yard in front of the sorrel. The horse snorted and backed away. Ed steadied the animal before it could start to buck. He didn't draw his own weapon, knowing that this shot across his bow had been simply a warning, or an indication that he was not alone in the draw.

ED SAW a gray gelding first, a big animal with a white face, and then he saw a man sitting on the ground, his back against a big rock, the gun balanced on his right knee, the muzzle still pointing at Ed.

The man on the ground was grinning coldly. He was a big, clumsy man with a fat, red face and small, sea-green eyes. He had a bulbous nose and thick, sensuous lips.

"Come riding, Buck," the man said, "and keep your hands off that gun."

A lazy man, he didn't get off the ground, but Ed noticed that the gun was very steady in his right hand. Ed let the sorrel walk over in his direction. He sat there and he fished in his shirt pocket for his tobacco pouch, waiting for the other man to make the conversation.

"Where do you figure you're going, Jack?" the clumsy man asked.

Carefully, Ed rolled a cigarette. He was a tall, lean man with whipcord muscles in his arms and shoulders. His gray eyes moved from the man on the ground, to the gun, to the gray horse standing a few yards away.

"Your land?" he asked.

"It might be." The man on the ground grinned.

"It might be Flying K range," Ed McLain observed, lighting the cigarette. You Leah Kimbrough?"

"That's not funny," the fat man said softly. "I asked where you were heading?"

"Just riding," Ed said.

"Don't stop," the fat man told him. "Or it might be the last ride you'll ever take."

Ed regarded him curiously, no emotion showing on his face. He knew that the man on the ground was watching him intently, wondering if he'd get any more information if he continued to ask questions, and then realizing that it was hopeless.

"Go ahead," the fat man said. He didn't

get up from the ground. And he didn't smile.

Ed turned the sorrel up out of the draw. He rode leisurely and he didn't look back. For one brief moment he thought the fat man would put a bullet through his back, and he felt his back muscles contracting. He didn't turn around, and then he was over the rim of the draw.

He forgot about the fat man sitting against the rock. He thought about the man in the black frock coat who had ridden a chestnut horse with three white stockings. This man had not wanted to be seen.

Riding due west Ed crossed a big meadow through which a stream of water trickled, its banks lined with willows. The land started to rise here and he saw cattle grazing on the slopes. The grass was good, better than he'd ever seen it in the South. A cool breeze swept down from the snow-capped Sawtooth Range through which he'd come two days before. He started to hum again, and he was still humming when he came in sight of the Flying K ranch, a collection of weather-beaten buildings scattered along a fifty foot wide stream.

He saw horses in the corral and tiny figures moving among the buildings. There was a new-mown hayfield a short distance up along the stream. Crossing a meadow and coming closer to the spread, Ed McLain saw a chestnut horse tied to the corral. The chestnut had three white legs.

Five minutes later Ed rode past the first of the Flying K barns. A man came out of the bunkhouse to look at him. Another man, snaking a horse out of the corral, stopped, rope in hand, to watch him cross toward the ranch house.

Then a squat, dark-haired man with hard black eyes came out of the barn and stood there, watching Ed, his hands on his hips. They were big, powerful hands. He carried a Smith & Wesson .44 on his left hip.

"All right, Jack," he said tersely.

Ed pulled up a half-dozen yards from him, and then looked toward the porch of the ranch house. It was a long, low affair, originally built of logs, finished later with clapboards. Several wings had been added through the years as the ranch grew. Old vines twined up around the porch pillars, shading the front of the house. Ed could see two people sitting in the shadows on the porch.

The black-haired man came over from the barn, watching Ed narrowly. He said grimly, "You got business here?"

"I'll tell Miss Kimbrough that," Ed said softly. He remembered that that was one of the reasons he'd consented to come out to the Flying K after being offered the job in Talbot. A woman was hiring hardcase riders, and he couldn't quite get over that. The yellow-haired man in the saloon in Talbot had had a drink

with him, sized him up over that drink, and then stated his case. There was seventy-five dollars a month and very little work for a man who was handy with a sixgun and who did not particularly care for sheep.

Both of these qualifications had fitted Ed. He'd been running low on cash, and he did not like the smell of sheep. He said he would run out to the Flying K after he heard that a woman owned it.

The black-haired man regarded Ed sourly for several moments and then scowled, "Come along."

Ed McLain slid out of the saddle, tied the horse to a corral post, and then followed this man, whom he took for the Flying K foreman. They walked toward the porch in silence, and Ed had a closer look at the chestnut with the three white stockings. He saw the owner of the horse a few moments later, black frock hat resting on his knees, pale, almost colorless eyes studying Ed shrewdly.

The man wore a black frock coat and string tie, and Ed immediately tabbed him as a lawyer. He was tall, clean-shaven, with curly brown hair—a good-looking man.

The girl with him was Leah Kimbrough, owner of the Flying K. Miss Kimbrough, Ed McLain had imagined, would be in her thirties, possibly forties, a spinster, hawk-faced, cold as ice.

He found a girl who was not more than twenty-five—and she could have been less. Her hair was the color of burnished copper, offset by clear blue eyes. She was of medium height. "Yes, Kramer?" she said.

Kramer scowled at Ed. He said, nodding at Ed, "He wants to see you."

"Jorgens sent me," Ed volunteered. "Said there was work for me on the Flying K." He watched the man in the chair scratch his chin, and he thought he saw a faint smile playing around the man's thin-lipped mouth. He wondered at that. He could see that this man didn't recognize him as the rider who'd nearly interrupted the conversation he'd had with the fat man in the draw.

"Did Jorgens tell you the kind of work we had open?" Miss Kimbrough asked him.

"Reckon I got a faint idea," Ed admitted. He studied her face carefully, and he knew that she was at her wits' end. She was not the type of woman to hire hardcase riders with hair triggers on their sixguns. She'd done this because it was a last resort.

"Kramer will tell you your duties," she said. Ed noticed that she didn't even ask his name. He touched the brim of his flat-crowned hat and walked after the surly Kramer. He rolled another cigarette in the shadows of the barn and sat down on a bale of hay.

Kramer, Flying K ramrod, turned around to look at him disdainfully.

"So you're another one?" he snapped.

"And you're one, too," Ed told him.

Kramer stared at him. "What?" he asked.

"A big head," Ed McLain said coolly, "who's not tough enough to hold up his end of the work and his boss has to bring in gunhands to help him do the work he hasn't got the guts to do himself."

Kramer's eyes widened, and then his jaw came out. He had a heavy jaw and a blunt nose like a bulldog.

He said softly, "Friend, you're askin' for a damned good lickin'."

ED LOOKED at the cigarette in his fingers, and he braced his feet beneath him. He smiled at Kramer, but he didn't get up. It was an open invitation, and Kramer, grinningly, accepted it.

"Might just as well get acquainted now," the Flying K man chuckled. He stepped over and slid the barn door shut. He was not as tall as Ed but considerably heavier. He had long, powerful arms, thick wrists, a tremendous torso.

Watching him coolly, calculatingly, Ed McLain knew that in a rough and tumble fight he could never expect to beat Kramer. The man's thick skull would take heavier punches than he could ever throw, and there was always the possibility that he would break the hands which had been his livelihood the past ten years.

When Kramer slid the heavy bolt across the barn door on the inside, Ed's fingers closed around an old horseshoe hanging on a peg just above his head.

Kramer turned from the door and charged directly at Ed, head lowered, reaching for Ed's waist. He came very fast, thinking to catch the taller man before he could get up from the bale of hay.

Ed swung his right hand in an overhead motion as he slid away from the bale. He didn't hit Kramer too hard with the horseshoe but hard enough to knock him to his knees.

The Flying K ramrod got up, blinking dazedly, staggering, only half conscious. Ed hit him twice and knocked him to the barn floor. Kramer lay there, staring up at the hay loft, mouth open. He was moving his arms and legs feebly. His head was not cut, but Ed knew he would have a lump on it the size of a hen's egg by nightfall.

Calmly, Ed walked to the barn door and swung it open again. Several of the Flying K hands had seen Kramer's move, and knowing what it was, had headed for the barn at a half run. They were standing outside, breathless, when Ed opened the door. He saw them look in at the dazed Kramer, and then stare at him, open-mouthed.

A little weazened man with crinkly blue

eyes murmured, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Ed McLain walked over to his horse and took off the warbag. He walked with the bag toward the bunkhouse, a cigarette in his mouth, the little man walking after him, a broad grin on his homely face. He had a tremendous nose and sand-colored hair.

Ed stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse, looking at the dozen and a half bunks in the long, rectangular room. He said over his shoulder, "Which one should I take, mister?"

The little man chuckled, "After what you just did, friend, have yore pick. Take two if you want 'em."

Ed McLain smiled and walked down to the south end of the room. He saw a bunk there which didn't appear to be occupied, and he dropped his bag on the floor beside it.

The little man said, "Name's Wing—George Wing."

"That so?" Ed said.

George Wing started to roll a cigarette with gnarled, brown fingers. He said softly, "Reckon you boys never have names, do you?"

"Call me Smith," Ed said.

Wing's grin broadened. "We got three Smiths already down along the Crow," he said. "Think o' somethin' better than that."

Ed sat down on the bunk. He said, "That our job, along the Crow?"

Wing nodded. "Miss Kimbrough has sixteen hands on the east bank o' the Crow, holdin' back fifteen thousand head o' sheep Ben Rayburn figures on movin' across the river."

Ed McLain stared at the floor thoughtfully. "Anybody killed yet?" he asked.

"It's comin' to that," Wing growled. "Fer a sheepman, Rayburn's a pretty tough hombre. He's had them woollies grazin' on the west slopes o' the Crow fer two months an' he's got to move 'em soon or they'll starve. Only grass is on the other side o' the river where Flyin' K has been since Leah Kimbrough's grandpa came into the country with the fur trappers."

"The other outfits fighting Rayburn?" Ed wanted to know.

"They're small," Wing explained, "an' every one of 'em kin be bought off if Rayburn kin knock down Flyin' K. They're still ranchmen 'cause Flyin' K hasn't quit. When Miss Kimbrough quits, the whole bench is turned over to sheep."

"So Miss Kimbrough is hiring gunnies to protect the river," Ed murmured. "How far has Rayburn gone?"

"Brought a parcel o' toughs along with him," Wing said. "Every once in a while they cross the Crow at night an' raid Flyin' K stock. They run damn near two hundred head into a dry gulch last week. I spent two hours shootin' what wasn't killed outright."

Ed McLain smiled grimly. Studying this

pattern, he realized that it was the same all over. He'd been in a dozen such feuds—cattleman against sheepman, cattleman against cattleman, fights over ranges, fights over railroad rights, water rights. It was always the same. One party harassed the other until it came to a head in a short, sweet fight. Then the man with the most professional gun throwers got what he wanted. It was as simple as that.

"Who was that chap on the porch with Miss Kimbrough?" Ed asked suddenly.

"Jonas Morrell," Wing said, "lawyer friend o' Miss Kimbrough's."

"How good a friend?" Ed wanted to know.

Wing looked at him. "Reckon they'll be gettin' married one o' these days," he said.

Ed rubbed his nose and leaned back in the bunk. He learned more from George Wing because the little man was lonely and wanted someone to talk to. Wing had worked for Leah Kimbrough's father, and he wasn't getting along with the new boss the girl had brought in.

"What about Kramer?" Ed asked him. "He an old Flyin' K hand?"

"Buck Kramer come to Flyin' K a year ago," Wing said grimly. "Morrell brought him over after Jack Simson quit an' started ranchin' fer himself up in the Elk Creek country."

ED WAS still sitting on the bunk when the men came in for supper. Buck Kramer straggled in after the others, still looking a little dazed. He hadn't seen the horseshoe in Ed's hand and he was still wondering how he'd been knocked out so easily. He glared at Ed and sat down at the other end of the table.

There was little talk in the bunkhouse. Ed looked at the other men as they came in. There were only seven of them here, and he realized that the others were probably eating at line shacks along the river.

Kramer said sullenly, looking straight at Ed, "You an' Wing take the No. 8 shack to-night."

Wing nodded and Ed McLain placed both hands on the table before getting up. He said, "Any particular orders?"

"You know what in hell you been hired for," Kramer scowled.

Ed grinned and went out, Wing following him. The little man saddled a buckskin horse in the barn while Ed waited outside for him. The moon was coming up over the Sawtooth Mountains—a half moon, very bright. Ed McLain watched it; he watched the girl coming down the porch steps, walking toward the barn. He noticed that the chestnut horse was gone.

Leah Kimbrough came straight toward him, even though he'd been standing in the shadows. He knew that she'd been watching from the porch, waiting for him to come out of the

bunkhouse because she had something to say.

She stopped in front of Ed and he touched his hat.

"You didn't tell me your name before," she said.

"Smith," Ed said, and he saw the slow smile slide across her face.

"So Bud Jorgens sent you down," she said quietly. "He tell you how much we were paying our hands."

"Seventy-five," Ed said, "for the kind of work I do."

"You—you have a price?" Leah Kimbrough asked him, wincing a little.

Ed hooked his hands in his gunbelt. "A man can be killed," he observed, "defending himself." He knew that the average cowhand seldom received more than thirty a month. He'd taken as much as one hundred and fifty and two hundred dollars for the "protection" he afforded various people.

"We do not want anyone killed," the girl said slowly. "I am only interested in protecting my property. If those sheep ever get across the river the Flying K is finished."

Ed nodded. George Wing came out of the stable, leading his horse. He looked at the two and kept going down to the water trough near the corral.

"You—you seem different from the other men I've hired," Leah Kimbrough said suddenly. "How long have you been in this work?"

Ed laughed bitterly. "A long time," he stated. "Too long." He didn't like to look back, but he'd been twenty-three when he quit the Bar M ranch and went into stock raising himself. He'd had seventy-five head of cattle, and in a year and half, sweating blood, working eighteen hours a day, he'd built the herd up to three hundred, only to see every animal freeze in a blizzard.

He'd looked at the pile of carcasses in a snow-filled gulch, and he'd gone into town and gotten drunk for the first time in eighteen months. That had been five years ago, and he'd drifted after that, doing anything, doing nothing. A man had offered him a hundred a month, not to punch cows, but to provide protection against other ranchers who were after his water.

After that Ed had walked easy and he'd carried a big gun. He'd had a mark on him, and Bud Jorgens in the Talbot saloon had recognized that mark. It was the mark of a profession.

Leah Kimbrough said, "I've regretted having to hire professional fighters, but I was unable to hire men in town. None of them wanted anything to do with the kind of men now working for Rayburn. He was getting ready to cross the river and I was short handed."

"Seems like Rayburn started the trouble," Ed said. "He's jumping your range. You have a right to protect yourself."

"If you feel that you don't want to work for Flying K," the girl said slowly, "you still have the opportunity to move on."

"Reckon I'll stay," Ed told her. "I'm a curious man."

He rode off with George Wing then, and Wing said, "Thought I told you she was marryin' Jonas Morrell."

"That's right," Ed admitted. "I forgot."

Chapter II

SHEEPER'S BULLET BAIT

THEY PASSED a number of small huts built back in the timber along the Crow River. Ed McLain looked at sour-faced men, guns across their knees, sitting outside these huts, watching the river. None of them spoke to Wing.

"Reckon they don't like themselves," Wing murmured. "Not that I blame 'em. They're touchy as all hell."

They relieved two other men in No. 8 shack, the last post of defense along the Crow. The river widened here to over a hundred and fifty feet, and Wing informed Ed that it was too deep to ford.

"If Rayburn tries to come across the Crow," the puncher observed, "he'll make his attempt south o' the ranch. River's plenty narrow there, an' shallow."

Ed took his sixgun from the holster, broke it, and examined the shells. He squinted down the barrel toward the river and he said softly, "Custom is for a man who doesn't like another to send him where the lead is thickest. What's the matter with Kramer?"

George Wing shrugged, but he was watching Ed closely. He said, "Buck Kramer never had any damned use fer me either, but I'm never near where Rayburn's toughs cross an' raid our stuff."

"That could mean something," Ed smiled, "and it could mean nothing."

Wing took the first watch while Ed slept on the cot inside the shack. Wing got him up at one o'clock in the morning and he said, "Quiet as the inside of a church."

Ed pulled on his boots and went out into the night. He took a drink from a bucket of water on a bench outside the shack, and then he walked down to the water's edge. It was much darker now than it had been earlier in the evening. The moon was moving in and out of a bank of dark clouds.

He stared across the river for some time and then headed back toward the shack. It was then that he heard the faint shots far to the south. Wing tumbled out of the shack a mo-

ment later, and Ed said to him, "We ride that way, Wing?"

The old puncher listened closely. There were more shots and the sounds seemed to be going away farther toward the south.

"They'll be gone in a few minutes," Ed McLain said. "We stand here all night?"

"Reckon that's right," Wing growled. "Orders from Buck Kramer. Buck figures Rayburn might be makin' a bluff at one section an' then when we all skip out he'll run his damned woollies across some other place."

Ed frowned. "It's logical," he admitted. "So we sit here and let Rayburn run the tallow off Flying K stock."

"You got any ideas?" Wing asked him.

"Where are Rayburn's sheep?" Ed wanted to know.

"I'd figure they was a half-dozen miles on the other side o' the Crow, up among the hills."

Ed walked over to his horse. He called over his shoulder, "We could take a look at them, George."

"Sure," Wing muttered. "You mean we leave our section open?"

"No sheep coming across here tonight," Ed explained patiently. "We'd have smelled them a long time ago if they were headed this way."

"Kramer never told us to cross the river," Wing said.

"That an order?" Ed grinned.

"Hell," Wing said, "Buck knew damned well none o' the boys were hankerin' to cross over an' take the lead Rayburn's toughs would throw at us. He never even mentioned it."

"Then we'll cross," Ed told him. He was whistling softly as he rode down along the river, looking for a good spot to cross.

George Wing followed, shaking his head. "He's on the job a couple o' hours an' he's turnin' everything upside down."

A hundred yards upstream Ed turned the sorrel into the water and let the animal pick its way out carefully until its legs slipped off a ledge. His gunbelt slung around his neck, Ed slipped out of the saddle then, and clinging to the saddle horn, let the sorrel pull him across the river. He heard George Wing coming behind him, cursing at the coldness of the water.

They went up on the other bank and into a willow thicket. Ed tried to wring some of the water from his clothing. He strapped the gunbelt around his waist and then he rolled a cigarette. He'd carried the little tobacco pouch in his teeth while swimming across the river.

George Wing chattered bitterly, "Why in hell do I foller these young fellers? I should be sleepin' in that shack across the river, enjoyin' life."

"You weren't happy," Ed told him calmly.

"You were sick of waiting for something to happen. It's happening now."

"Yeah?" Wing said. "All I know is that I'm damned wet an' I'm on the other side o' the Crow."

"We'll look fro Rayburn's woollies," Ed smiled. "That'll keep us warm."

"Warm, or dead," Wing said sourly, "if we run into any o' Rayburn's gunhands."

Ed McLain smoked his cigarette through, listening for further sounds to the south. They heard a shot, very distant, and then silence.

"We'll ride," Ed said.

They pushed in from the river, Ed walking his horse. They went over one fold in the hills, and then another. George Wing stopped his horse then and pointed. Ed saw the tiny spot of light on the horizon.

"That'll be a sheepherder's campfire," the puncher muttered. "Now you know where they are."

"We'll ride around them a bit," Ed said softly. "I want to see if sheep can run as fast as cattle."

Wing said queerly, "You thinkin' o' runnin' Rayburn's sheep?"

"Rayburn ran Flying K stock," Ed said patiently. "We'll let him know we can play his game also."

Wing thought that over and then started to laugh. "Reckon I'd like to see Rayburn's face in the mornin'," he grinned.

ED SMELLED the sheep before they were within a half-mile of them. Wrinkling his nose, he swung the sorrel toward the north, away from the herders' fire. He could see the animals then, a white, blurry mass in front of him. He said to Wing, "We'll hif them here and just keep riding." He took his sixgun from the holster and held it over his head. He rode forward then, emptying the gun, and when it was empty he smashed in among the frightened animals, waving his hat, yelling at the top of his voice.

Wing drove in from a point twenty-five yards down the line, and the sheep spilled over the plains in all directions. Ed thought he heard a faint shout from the campfire as he continued to ride through the flock.

The sheep were running now, spreading out into the hills. Ed managed to refill the sixgun and he emptied it again. He heard Wing shooting spasmodically off to his right, charging up and down among the sheep, yipping.

In ten minutes it was over and two-thirds of the flock were scattered for miles among the hills. Ed heard riders coming up and he drifted back in the direction of the Crow, picking up Wing as he went. The little man was laughing silently.

They swam back across the river, and then Wing started up a roaring fire over which they could dry their clothing. Ed sat inside the shack, smoking a cigarette.

He heard Wing say softly, "There'll be hell to pay in the mornin'. Rayburn's a pretty tough hombre."

They had a leisurely breakfast in the morning, and then rode back to the ranch. Passing one of the shacks, a Flying K rider came out and stared at them. He said to Wing:

"You hear somebody went across the river an' scattered Rayburn's sheep from here to Kingdom Come?"

"No!" Wing said in mock surprise. "Now who would do that to poor Ben Rayburn?"

The Flying K man regarded them quizzically. He gave Ed a long, steady stare. Then he shook his head.

"Reckon somebody will pay fer that," he murmured.

Ed McLain grinned at him. When they came up to the Flying K ranch house, Buck Kramer was waiting for them outside the bunkhouse. Kramer's lips were tight.

He said savagely, "Who in hell asked you boys to go across the Crow last night?"

"Who?" George Wing asked innocently.

"Rayburn could have come around you," Kramer grated, "knocked you off, an' crossed every damned woollie in his flock."

"He didn't," Ed said softly. "I hear Rayburn's riders were on our side of the river last night also."

"What about it?" Kramer snapped.

"I figured," Ed observed, "it was our job to keep them on their side, too."

"You'll figure so much," Kramer said grimly, "that you'll end up with a chest full of lead."

"Not your lead, Buck," Ed smiled. "Remember that." He went into the bunkhouse, and when he came out ten minutes later Wing said to him.

"Miss Kimbrough wants to see you, kid."

Ed lifted his eyebrows and then glanced toward the house. "Kramer telling tales?" he asked the little puncher.

"Ask her," Wing said.

Ed went into the house, hat in hand. It was tastefully furnished. There was a piano in one corner, bookcases, rich Indian rugs on the floor and on the walls. Their was a painting of Leah Kimbrough's father, a big portrait on one wall. Ed was looking at it when the girl came in. She was very quiet.

"I hear you went across the river last night and scattered Mr. Rayburn's sheep," she said.

Ed McLain twisted the hat. He said, "Reckon you're right, Miss Kimbrough."

"I—I don't want any incidents," Leah Kimbrough said slowly, "that will bring about a shooting match. I don't want to see any of our men killed."

"I'll kill any man," Ed said without emotion, "who tries to kill me."

"No one tried to kill you," the girl pointed out.

Ed smiled patiently. "Rayburn's riders came across the Crow last night and raided Flying K stock. When they do that they hit at me. I ride for Flying K."

Leah Kimbrough regarded him queerly. "You men have your pride," she said. "I didn't know that. However, in the future I'll have to order you to stay on this side of the river."

Ed shrugged, "Your ranch," he said, "but it won't be for long." He went out then, leaving the girl staring after him.

At noon he was down at the corral watching a Flying K rider breaking a little buckskin horse. The buckskin was vicious and the rider was having a time staying on its back.

Buck Kramer came up behind Ed. He said sourly, "You workin' for Flying K?"

"You know what I was hired for," Ed told him coolly. He'd never done any manual labor in between times while working for an employer. None of the other hired gunhands worked on the Flying K. He'd seen them lolling about the ranch, sleeping in the bunkhouse, drinking coffee in the cook's kitchen.

"I'm short-handed," Kramer growled. "I need somebody to ride into Talbot with Miss Kimbrough. She's carryin' a lot o' cash for deposit in the bank. We sold half a hundred head o' stock to Miles Miller, a rancher up on Squaw Creek. He paid cash."

Ed McLain looked at the man, wondering why Kramer had selected him to ride with Miss Kimbrough. It was obviously a weak excuse. Kramer could have assigned any one of half a dozen other Flying K men. A half-hour before, Ed had seen several of the paid gunhands riding east and he knew they'd been headed for Talbot also. Miss Kimbrough could have gone with them.

"All right," Ed said. "I'll saddle up."

He found Miss Kimbrough waiting for him outside the barn. She rode a gray gelding. She said, "I told Kramer it wouldn't be necessary for me to have an escort. He insisted."

Ed only nodded, but his mind was working rapidly. He hadn't been aware of the fact that Kramer, and not Miss Kimbrough, had arranged this little trip to town.

"Reckon I can stand a shave and haircut," he said, "while you're at the bank."

HE RODE a little behind her, and he saw George Wing watching him curiously as he left the ranch. He waved a hand to Wing. Buck Kramer sat on the corral bars, watching the rider on the buckskin horse, but Ed saw him turn his head slightly to look after them. He stared straight ahead.

There was little conversation during the hour ride to Talbot. Ed said once, "How

long you figure on holding Rayburn across the river?"

Leah Kimbrough bit her lips grimly. "My father would have hated to see Flying K range go to sheep. We're staying on our side with guns until Rayburn gets tired and looks for other grazing land."

"That might take a long time," Ed observed.

"I have time," the girl said.

"Not if Rayburn continues to raid your herds," Ed stated. "He'll chew you down till you can't stay in business. When you have no more stock on the range and you can't pay your hired hands, they quit and Rayburn makes his crossing."

"And you'll quit with them," Leah said tersely.

Ed shrugged. "We'll see. I like to see a hand through when I'm in it."

Talbot was a dry, dusty town, skirting the north bank of the Crow. The bank was a two-story building of red brick with iron shutters. There was a single street of stores and saloons. Ponies stood at the racks in front of each saloon, more ponies than Ed had expected to see at this hour of the day. He noted this fact and filed it away in the back of his mind.

The Talbot Hotel was the other two-story structure in Talbot, and it occupied a position directly opposite the bank. There was a porch running around the entire front of the building which stood on a corner. Where the north and the west wings of the porch met at the head of the street, a fat, clumsy man sat, big boots up on the porch railing, a cigar in his mouth. He regarded Ed and the girl with interest.

The fat man was the man Ed had met in the draw the day before. Ed said as they dismounted in front of the bank, "That man on the porch Rayburn?" He jerked his head in the direction of the hotel.

Leah Kimbrough said, "Yes," tersely, and then she looked at Ed. "Don't start any trouble with him," she warned.

Ed smiled. "I came here for a haircut and shave," he pointed out.

The barber was across the road, adjourning the hotel. Ed crossed the road, waiting as a horseman rode in front of him. He had to walk past the spot at which Rayburn was sitting. He gave the fat man a friendly smile.

Rayburn took the cigar from his mouth, looked at it, and said, "So."

Ed grinned at him. He paused and said, "Maybe you should have put that slug through me instead of in front of my pony."

Rayburn nodded. "There's time for that," he said.

"Maybe," Ed told him, "not as much time as you think, Ben."

Rayburn flicked cigar ash from the cigar. He said softly, "My boys are rounding up the sheep you scattered up in the hills last night. It'll take them three days, friend. That wasn't nice."

"News travels fast in this country," Ed observed.

"Fast enough for a cheap drifter like yourself," Rayburn said. "Nobody invited you in to this fight."

"I'm in it," Ed said, grinning, "and I'm happy."

"Think about that," Rayburn told him, "when you're laying out in the road with a slug through your belly."

Ed saw a man step out of the Alhambra saloon diagonally across the street, wiping his lips. He stopped suddenly, stared at Ed, and then turned and walked back into the saloon. Ed McLain's eyes flickered. He walked on towards the barber shop, thinking rapidly. The spot Ben Rayburn had picked commanded a view of the entire town. This could have been more than mere coincidence.

Once before, Ed had been set up in El Paso. He had the same feeling now as he stepped into the empty barber shop and dropped his hat on a peg.

The barber had been standing by the window, and Ed knew he'd been watching the two of them talking at the hotel porch. The barber was a fat-faced man with thin brown hair and a flabby chin. When Ed had settled himself he said,

"Working for Rayburn?"

"Flying K," Ed said casually.

The barber blinked at him as he tied the apron around Ed's neck. He muttered, "New rider?"

"That's right," Ed said. He slipped his sixgun out of the holster underneath the apron, and held it in his hand. The barber turned the chair so that it faced the mirror on the wall. Ed said softly, "Other way, friend. I want to look out at the street."

The barber swallowed audibly and turned the chair. Ed could see the hotel porch from here, and Ben Rayburn's bulky figure sprawled in the wicker chair. He could see the bank and the Alhambra. Between the two buildings was another one-story, false-front affair with a plate glass window in front of it. Ed read the words: Jonas Morrell, Attorney at Law.

Rayburn was smoking his cigar again, his battered black hat tilted on the side of his head, boots up on the railing. Two men came out of the Alhambra, and Ed McLain recognized the type—the thin faces, the nervous twitching of the hands as they lighted cigarettes, their utter inability to fade into the scenery the way they would have liked to.

A third man stood just inside the bat-wing doors, looking out. He flipped his cigarette

over the top of the doors and then blew his nose with a red bandanna handkerchief.

Ben Rayburn, on the porch, calmly turned his head and looked towards the barber shop. He looked away again, no expression on his face, but Ed McLain felt a cold chill go through him.

As the barber started to work on him he watched the three men move into position. One of them dropped down on a barrel just in front of the saloon. The second man crossed the road farther up the street, and Ed knew he was taking up a position, facing the barber shop.

The third man, still inside the Alhambra, disappeared for a moment, and then emerged from the alley to the right of the saloon. He stood at the corner there, rolling a cigarette, watching the barber shop, watching Ben Rayburn under the rim of his hat.

The door of Morrell's office opened and the lawyer came out, locking the door behind him. He crossed the street, a tall man, colorless eyes flicking to either side of the road. He didn't see Ed in the barber shop.

Morrell swung past the porch where Rayburn was sitting, glanced at him, no recognition in his eyes, and kept going. Rayburn didn't even look at the man.

Ed McLain smiled faintly. He relaxed in the chair, knowing that Rayburn's gunhands weren't making a play until he came out on the street. The set-up was apparent from then on. There would be an imaginary insult of some kind, possibly a jostle on the street. Then the guns would roar and he would get his from the rear or from the side. He would get it before he had time to draw his gun and make a fight out of it.

Leah Kimbrough came out of the bank and walked up the street in the direction of the stores. She glanced once toward the barber shop and she saw him through the window.

"She's having her troubles," the barber said. "That Rayburn is tough."

Ed nodded. He said, "Rayburn and Morrell pretty good friends?"

The barber stared at him. "They don't know each other," he said. "I suppose Morrell is aware of that fact that Ben Rayburn is trying to take over Flying K range."

"Rayburn in town very often?" Ed asked next.

The barber shook his head. "First time I saw Ben in two weeks," he admitted.

Ed McLain's eyes flickered. He wondered again how it was that Rayburn and three of his gunhands happened to be in town the one afternoon Kramer asked Ed McLain to escort Miss Kimbrough to Talbot.

"How does this town take the fight?" Ed asked curiously. In other towns it had always been the cattlemen who were most popular in

their stand-off fights to keep sheep out of the country.

The barber said evenly, "Rayburn's tough, mister."

Ed smiled. The barber hadn't said much, but it spoke volumes. The peaceful townspeople, who wanted no part of the fight, undoubtedly were with Leah Kimbrough and the Flying K, but Ben Rayburn was very tough. They looked the other way.

When the barber finally took off the apron and shook it out, Ed said, "Can I get a bath?"

"Hot water's on the stove," the barber said. "I'll bring it in." He nodded toward a door in the rear of the shop.

Ed stretched himself and then walked into the smaller room in the rear. He found the tin tub, a couple of buckets of water, a chair and a lot of old newspapers and magazines. He sat down in the chair and picked up a newspaper.

In ten minutes the barber came in with a bucket of hot water and poured it into the tub. Ed didn't move from the chair. He watched the steam ascending toward the ceiling.

Chapter III

GUNMAN'S PAYOFF

THERE was one small window, hooked from the inside, which opened on the rear of the barber shop. Ed studied this window carefully, noting its height from the ground. When the barber went out he hooked the door from the inside. The hook was not very strong.

He sat down again in the chair and scanned the newspaper curiously, making no attempt to undress. He pushed his chair closer to the door and when he heard a step on the wooden floor outside, and the barber's greeting, he applied his eye to the keyhole.

Three customers came in during the passage of one hour, and several times Ed saw the barber look toward the bath door, a frown on his face. Another half-hour passed. Once Ed got up and stretched, walked around the room a few times and then sat down on the chair again. Outside on the street he could imagine Rayburn's three gun hands waiting for him to come out, getting more jumpy every moment. He remembered that Leah Kimbrough was waiting for him also, wondering what had happened. He hoped she would start home by herself.

It was quarter to four, with the barber shop empty, when the Rayburn man who had been sitting on the barrel in front of the Alhambra came through the door. He was a narrow-faced man with deep-sunk, watery blue eyes and a nervous habit of licking his lips.

He didn't speak to the barber, but Ed saw

him slip the sixgun out of the holster, and with it motion the white-faced barber to one side. Ed took his gun out and stood up on the chair which he'd placed to one side of the door. He flattened himself against the wall and waited.

A floor-board creaked near the door, and then the door shot suddenly open as the gunman's boot-tip collided with it. The thin-faced man came in a moment later, gun in hand, lips drawn back in a snarl.

Ed McLain slapped the barrel of his sixgun against the man's skull, and then caught him with his left hand as the man started to sag. He came off the chair and lowered the unconscious fighter to the floor. Picking up the gun which the man had dropped, he tossed it into one of the water buckets.

He called softly to the barber, "Stay where you are, friend." Then he opened the little window and climbed through, dropping to the ground. A woman was hanging out wash on a line in the rear of one of the houses. She stared at him as he came through the window.

Ed McLain brushed himself off, tipped his hat gravely, and headed down along the path behind the line of houses on the main street. He turned down an alley which opened on the main street, and approaching the corner, he walked quietly, his right hand on the butt of the gun.

A man passed the front of the alley, but didn't look down. Ed saw the shadow of another man—a long, thin shadow falling across the head of the alley. The man was looking up the street toward the barber shop, body tense, elbows hooked. He was standing on the edge of the walk near one of the wooden awning uprights, and the late afternoon sun flashed in under the awning, falling full upon him.

Ed glanced quickly up and down the street. There were more people in town now, but none of them were nearby. He said tersely,

"Drop that gunbelt and don't turn around."

The man at the corner stiffened, and the fingers of his gun-hand started to twitch. He didn't look around. Ed McLain said softly,

"Ever get a piece of lead in the small of your back, friend?"

The man's hands went up then toward the buckle of the belt, and a moment later it dropped to the walk. Ed came around, jammed his gun in the man's back, and with his boot-tip jerked the gunbelt to the rear.

He slipped the gun back into the holster then, grabbed his man by the shoulder with his left hand, spun him around and hit him full on the jaw with the right.

The man's hat fell off as he plunged backward into an open door. He had pale, bleached hair and his face was freckled. There was no life in his eyes when he hit the floor of the saddlemaker's shop.

ED SCOOPED up the gunbelt and walked swiftly up the street, picking out the third man at the next corner, diagonally across the street, and directly opposite the hotel porch. The porch was empty now, but the chair in which Ben Rayburn had been sitting was in the same spot.

Without looking, Ed tossed the gunbelt through the open door of the barber shop and kept going across the road directly toward the man who was lounging against the wall of a building. The action had been so swift up the street that he hadn't even noticed that his partner was out of the fight, but he came away from the wall when he spotted Ed moving toward him, hands swinging at his sides, a small grin on his face.

Ed saw him glance up the street, and then hurriedly toward the porch where Rayburn had been sitting. He was a saw-toothed man, sporting a mustache. His mouth went slack beneath the mustache when Ed came up on the walk less than ten feet away from him. He made one motion to go for his gun and then he started to back away, his nerve breaking. He muttered, "All right, now. All right."

Ed McLain hit him full in the mouth with his open hand. He slapped at him with the other hand then, and followed the man along the wall, cuffing him so that his head bobbed back and forth like a cork.

"Damn it!" the man half-screamed. "I'll kill you!"

Ed knocked him down with his closed fist, the grin never leaving his face. Coming across the street he'd known that the fight was all over. He hadn't given the gunhand time to think things over. The relentless, onward march had taken the nerve from the other man.

Ed stood over him, smiling. He said, "You want to use that gun, kid?" He heard Leah Kimbrough say behind him, angrily,

"That wasn't necessary."

Ed McLain came around slowly. He said, "Maybe I should let him shoot me down. This chap's a Rayburn hand."

"Of course," the girl snapped, "you're sure he was going to shoot you down."

"Quite sure," Ed said mildly.

Leah Kimbrough stared at him for a moment in silence, closed her eyes briefly, and then walked steadily towards her horse, still tied outside the bank.

Ed watched her go, jaw tightening, telling himself he should throw up the whole business and push out. The Rayburn man on the ground was saying bitterly,

"I'll get you for this, friend. I'll get you—"

"Shut up," Ed said savagely. "I'll kick your damned brains in." He bent down, ripped the man's gun from the holster, and tossed it up on a shed roof. He went across the street

then and moved slowly up the hotel steps.

Several men were standing in front of the door, and they gave way quickly when they saw the ugly look on his face. He went into the hotel bar just off the dining room, and he found Ben Rayburn at the end of the bar, drinking alone. The big room was nearly empty.

The fat man saw him coming in and he turned, lifting a glass to his lips. Ed walked straight up to the man and slapped at the glass, knocking it from Rayburn's fingers, spilling the liquor across the fat man's coat front. He said tensely,

"You sent three of your dirty killers after me, Rayburn. You want to try it yourself now?"

Ben Rayburn stared at him in amazement, wide-mouthed that any man would have the temerity to do such a thing to him. He said slowly, "You're tough, friend."

"I'll get tougher," Ed told him. "You might just as well make your play now, Ben."

"No," Rayburn shook his head slowly. "There's plenty of time for saddlebums like you."

Ed McLain laughed at him disdainfully. He turned his back on the fat man and walked out through the door. On the porch he saw Leah Kimbrough riding down the main street at the other end of town. She had not waited for him.

He stared after the girl grimly. He was walking toward his own horse when he noticed that the office of Jonas Morrell was open. Walking past the tie rack, he went up on the boardwalk and through the door.

The lawyer sat behind his desk, his coat off. He looked steadily at Ed when the tall man pulled up in front of him. He said softly, "Have a seat."

Ed watched him distastefully, hands hooked in his gunbelt. He said, "You know me, Morrell?"

Jonas Morrell shrugged. He picked up a pencil and looked at it. He said, "You're a new hand at Flying K."

Ed watched him for a few moments in silence, listening to the clock tick on the wall. Morrell said abruptly, "What can I do for you? This is a business office."

Ed grinned at him coldly. He said softly, "Reckon you can tell me why one man meets another down in a draw where no one can see them, and then doesn't know that man when they meet in town."

JONAS MORRELL had been drumming on the table with a pencil. He stopped abruptly and his colorless eyes narrowed. Ed McLain thought he saw the sweat breaking out on the man's forehead.

"What do you want in this country?" Mor-

rell asked slowly. His eyes drilled into McLain. "What does any man want?" Ed countered. He added slyly, "Especially a man with good ears and good eyes."

Morrell leaned back in the chair, smiling. He said, "All right, so you know I had a talk with Ben Rayburn out on the plains. What about it?"

"How would that strike Miss Kimbrough?" Ed asked him. "What about that?"

Jonas Morrell pursed his lips. "How much do you want?"

"I don't know," Ed McLain said. "Maybe I'm just curious. Maybe I just want to see how things work out."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Morrell smiled. "It won't kill me," Ed assured him. "I'll be around a long time."

"I'll pay you five hundred dollars to leave this part of the country," Jonas Morrell said, "and I'm a fool to do it."

"Maybe," Ed observed, "I'm a fool to turn it down, but I am." He left the office with the lawyer staring after him thoughtfully. He rode back to the Flying K alone, and he found George Wing in the barn going over some harnessing. He said to Wing, "What does Jonas Morrell want most in this world?"

Wing grinned and rubbed his chin. He said, "Reckon he'd like to be a state senator."

Ed lifted his eyebrows. "Politics?" he asked.

Wing nodded. "Morrell's a big fish in a small pond and he wants to get out o' this pond. Once he gets his start he'll go a long way. He's shrewd."

"Why doesn't he start?" Ed wanted to know.

Wing shrugged. "You see how big Talbot is," he observed. "How many payin' clients does a man get in a year in Talbot?"

Ed nodded. "So Jonas needs money," he said softly.

"You see damn few men in this country git up to the top without it," Wing smiled. "They need backin'. If not their own money, then somebody else's."

Ed saw a shadow fall across the floor, and looking up he saw Buck Kramer's solid frame in the doorway. Kramer was watching him grimly.

"Surprised to see me back?" Ed said.

Kramer spat. "Why in hell should I be surprised to see you back?" he countered.

"You figure that one out," Ed said. He knew that Kramer had undoubtedly spoken to Leah Kimbrough when the girl rode in ten minutes before. Kramer had gotten the news from Talbot.

"Hear you had it out with some o' Rayburn's boys," Kramer said. "You'll stick your neck out once too often."

"I won't have it in the ground," Ed grinned,

"when the guns start to pop, I know that." Buck Kramer gave him a long look. He said grimly, "You boys will take the No. 8 shack tonight."

When he turned to go, Ed called after him casually, "Anybody tries to set me up twice in a row, Buck, I'm coming after him."

Kramer stopped. He swung around slowly. "You're as crazy as all hell," he said.

"Remember it," Ed told him.

When Kramer left, George Wing said, "Somebody set you up in Talbot this afternoon?"

"Rayburn," Ed admitted, "and others."

"It'll happen again," Wing warned, "and damned quick."

Ed McLain nodded. He'd been aware of that when he'd spoken to Jonas Morrell; he'd intentionally prodded the lawyer so that the action would come quickly. By now, McLain had unraveled the plot Morrell and Ben Rayburn were setting up.

Morrell needed money, and Ben Rayburn apparently had it. Rayburn's sheep were no good unless he could get them across the Crow. His huge flock of woollies was eating up the scant grass on the west side of the Crow, and they'd need new grazing land very shortly.

Leah Kimbrough's stubbornness in hiring professional gunhands had stymied Rayburn for the time being. The big sheep owner had made a deal with Morrell of some kind, and Ed could only guess at its implications. If the girl married Morrell, the lawyer could arrange to turn the Flying K grazing land over to Rayburn for a price. This money, along with the still valuable Flying K, would be the springboard from which Jonas Morrell would take his plunge into politics.

Possibly Morrell had also been assured of Ben Rayburn's backing after the sheepman took over the whole bench. With Flying K's bulwark down, Rayburn would flood the land with sheep, driving every cattleman out of the country. In time Rayburn would be the biggest man in the state, and his support to a political candidate would mean something.

Buck Kramer, Ed had no doubt, had been brought in by Morrell, and Kramer was working with Rayburn, deliberately permitting Rayburn's toughs to cross the river and raid Flying K stock in an attempt to discourage Miss Kimbrough. Kramer had arranged the deal with Ben Rayburn wherein Ed McLain was to be shot down in the streets of Talbot.

Morrell had to act fast now, knowing that the new Flying K gunhand was on to him, and not sure what the man would do. Ed's refusal to accept money could mean two things to Morrell. Either he wanted more than Morrell had offered, or he was getting ready to spill the whole plan to Leah Kimbrough.

Sitting inside the Flying K barn, Ed McLain tried to figure Morrell's next move. George Wing watched him curiously while he worked on the harnessing, softening the leather with oil. Wing said finally, "Reckon you know more about this business than you're sayin', friend."

Ed smiled at him. He crossed to the bunkhouse and lay down for two hours, the thought back in his mind that he wouldn't be getting much sleep that night.

It was six o'clock when he got up and walked to the door. He saw Morrell's chestnut horse tied near the corral. He went back to the table in the bunkhouse and played solitaire until supper time. Only four men ate in the bunkhouse that night. Buck Kramer was not with them.

George Wing looked at Ed and shook his head soberly. He didn't say anything until they had stepped out into the shadows after supper. Wing was smoking a cigar, the tip of it glowing in the darkness.

"What's up?" Wing asked.

"I don't see any of Miss Kimbrough's gun hands," Ed observed.

"They could be out at the shacks already," Wing said. "Maybe Kramer's figurin' on a quick crossin' tonight an' he's gettin' ready."

"Maybe," Ed agreed.

He heard Leah Kimbrough calling from the house—calling for Wing. The puncher walked away and Ed smoked his cigarette through. He saddled the sorrel and he waited for Wing to come back. He saw Wing moving around near the carriage house, moving in and out of the lantern light.

IT WAS nearly seven o'clock when Wing came over, ready to ride out to the No. 8 shack.

Ed said casually, "Hell of a lot of excitement around here tonight."

Wing grumbled something that was unintelligible. They rode past the corral, and Ed glanced back at the lighted ranch house, a frown on his face. Jonas Morrell's chestnut horse was still tied near the corral.

"So he's staying for supper," Ed observed.

Wing didn't say anything until they were some distance up along the river.

"You want to know? She's marryin' him tonight."

Ed pulled up the sorrel immediately. He stared at Wing for some time in silence.

"She told me," Wing scowled, "but nobody else. I'm an old Flyin' K hand an' I worked fer her father. She asked me to git the buckboard ready. They're ridin' up to Junction City right after the weddin'."

"Tonight," Ed said slowly.

"She sent one o' the boys to ask Parson Edwards to run down from Talbot," Wing

went on. "The parson will be here about eight o'clock."

Ed McLain took a long breath. He said, "The parson live in the building next to the church in town?" He'd noticed the church when he first rode into Talbot. It was a small white building just off the main street at the north end of town.

"Reckon that's it," Wing said queerly. "Why?"

"You ride on to the shack," Ed told him. "I'll be along later." He turned the sorrel and headed east, Wing staring after him. In five minutes he was on the Talbot road, and in another twenty minutes moving down the main street.

He dismounted outside the parsonage and rapped on the door, hat in hand. The door was opened by a white-haired old man who was just struggling into a stiff collar.

"The Reverend Edwards?" Ed asked.

"That's right." The minister nodded.

"I'm from the Flying K," Ed told him.

"Miss Kimbrough asked me to tell you they're going up to Junction City for the marriage. You're to meet them at the Sherman Hotel."

"Junction City?" Parson Edwards murmured. "Why I won't be able to get there before ten o'clock this evening."

Ed McLain scratched his chin dubiously. "Reckon she didn't say anything about the time of the wedding," he said.

The minister brightened up. "I'll arrange to stay in Junction tonight," he stated, "and ride back tomorrow morning."

Ed rode off, heading back for the Flying K. He let the sorrel run this time, and when he raised the lights of the ranch house, he turned north along the Crow, heading for the No. 8 shack.

George Wing had a fire going and his gun out when Ed came up to the shack. He slid away the gun.

"What in hell you been doin'?"

"Bucking Cupid," Ed grinned. He dropped from the saddle and walked to the shack. "Any excitement?" he asked.

"I'm thinkin' there'll be plenty o' hell along the Crow tonight," Wing said. "Too damned quiet." He added significantly, "I passed the No. 7 shack on the way up here. It's empty."

Ed McLain spun around. "Empty?" he gasped. "What about the other shacks?"

Wing shook his head. "I figured Kramer must o' doubled the guard down the river an' took the boys out o' No. 7."

Ed ran for the sorrel. "We'll have a look at the other shacks."

"We leavin' No. 8?" Wing asked, surprised.

"We can get back in an hour if we have to," Ed told him grimly. "This is more important."

They moved away from the shack, leaving the fire outside still burning. Ed stared across the Crow. The night was dark and there was the smell of rain in the air. It had not rained for months and the range grass had been turning brown.

Wing said quietly, "We'll be gettin' it tonight, an' that'll give Ben Rayburn a chance to run his damned woodlies over. It'll be too dark to see 'em comin'."

Ed sent the sorrel down along the river and he listened to the song of the wind through the willows. The No. 7 shack was a mile and a half downstream. There was no light, no fire. Ed kicked on the door with his boot tip, but didn't dismount.

When there was no answer, he sent the sorrel at a fast trot in the direction of the next shack. He'd been told that Leah Kimbrough had had these huts erected hastily when Rayburn's sheep appeared on the horizon. They were small, accommodating two men, the cooking was done outside on the ground.

The No. 6 shack was also empty. George Wing scratched his head.

"What in hell is Kramer doin'?" he asked.

"We'll find out," Ed McLain told him. They went down along the river, finding shack after shack empty. Even at the fording place, the most likely spot for Rayburn's crossing, the No. 3 shack had been abandoned.

"Hell," Wing said slowly, "Miss Kimbrough don't know nothin' about this. She told me tonight to keep the boys along the river. Buck Kramer's actin' on his own takin' 'em all off."

"None of the men were at the bunkhouse tonight," Ed said slowly. "That means Kramer took them off late this afternoon."

"Where are they?" Wing wanted to know.

"Kramer paid them off," Ed said, "and sent them out of the country. It meant that Rayburn's making his crossing tonight."

"Buck Kramer!" Wing said softly.

"He's on Rayburn's payroll," Ed told the man. "He's left the river open for Ben. How many men does Miss Kimbrough have with the stock?"

Wing thought for a moment. "We had eight hands before she started bringin' in the hard-cases. One boy quit, an' that leaves seven. Reckon most of 'em will be with the herd tonight."

"Bring them all up to the river," Ed ordered. "Tell them to run up a couple of hundred head of cattle with them. Hold the stock in the brush near the No. 3 shack."

George Wing licked his lips. He said thoughtfully, "You takin' over?"

"Any objections?" Ed wanted to know.

Wing grinned. "Reckon I'm with anybody fights Rayburn," he said. "I'll have the boys along the river in an hour. What about

you? What in hell you going to pull off?"

Ed McLain smiled grimly. "Kramer left the whole river open, but he gave us orders to stay at the No. 8 shack. I'm wondering why."

"Kramer don't have much use fer you," Wing stated, "an' neither does Ben Rayburn. They'll raid that shack before they run the woollies over."

"Somebody should be there," Ed said, "to welcome Rayburn's boys." He turned the sorrel. "I'll be down at the No. 3 shack when you get back."

"They'll make a damned sieve out o' you," Wing warned.

Ed laughed. He felt the first drops of warm rain when he started upriver again. He could hear it pattering into the dust, falling in the river. It felt good on his shoulders as it penetrated the shirt. When it began to fall in earnest he took the stickler from the roll behind the saddle, slipped into it, and buttoned it around his neck. The water dripped from the rim of his hat as he rode along.

Chapter IV

DEATH TO THE RIVER RAIDERS!

ED FIGURED the time to be nearly ten o'clock when he stopped the sorrel several hundred yards south of the shack. He wondered how long Jonas Morrell would wait at the Flying K ranch house before suspecting that something had gone wrong somewhere. They might attribute the minister's tardiness to the rain.

Slipping a Winchester rifle from the saddle holster, Ed started up along the river on foot. He listened for sounds in the night, but could hear nothing but the patter of the rain all around him. He slipped among the willows along the shore, keeping the Winchester under the slicker so that it wouldn't get wet.

He was within fifty yards of the No. 8 shack when he saw the dark shape moving ahead of him. The little fire in front of the hut had sizzled out long ago in the rain, but Ed could make out the dim shape of the shack backed up against the trees about twenty-five yards up from the river.

The man up ahead of him was creeping toward the shack, his slicker shiny with rain. Ed went after him, dropping the Winchester, and sliding his sixgun from the holster. When the man ahead of him dropped behind a clump of brush and peered toward the shack, Ed kept coming, stepping lightly, the sound of falling rain blotting out the footsteps.

He was within six feet of the man behind the brush when his boot struck an upturned ledge of rock. The man was coming around, and Ed caught a brief glimpse of his white face just before he crashed the barrel of the

sixgun over the man's head. The blow was hard.

The Rayburn man pitched forward into the brush and Ed fell on top of him, his left hand feeling for the gun. He heard a man say sharply from his left, "What in hell was that?"

It was the voice of Buck Kramer. Ed muffled his voice as best he could, hoping it would get by. He mumbled, "Tripped over a damned rock."

There was a moment of silence and then Kramer said tersely, "Get in closer. They might have seen us comin' up an' be waitin' inside till we come out in the open."

Ed McLain relaxed on the ground. Taking the gun from the unconscious man's limp hand, he stuck it in his belt and started to crawl forward again. He saw Buck Kramer move from one bush to another, and then he spotted another man up closer to the shack.

Ben Rayburn's voice suddenly snapped out, "Give 'em hell."

A fusillade of shots pierced the flimsy shack, and then a second volley.

"In on 'em!" Rayburn yelled, and Ed tore in with the others. He saw a man kick in the door and empty his sixgun into the shack. Somebody was saying sourly, "Reckon they skipped out, Ben."

Ed joined the group in front of the shack. He counted five men, all of them in slickers. He had his flat-crowned hat pulled down low over his eyes. He stood a little to the rear and said nothing.

Ben Rayburn had struck a match and gone inside. The match went dead and he came out, a bulky shape in the semi-darkness, looking even bigger in the shining slicker.

"Somebody tipped them off," he said thickly. "We'll head back across the river and run the sheep over anyway. Garvey, you head down on this side of the river. If you run into any Flying K riders, skip across and let us know where they are."

There was a moment of silence, and then Rayburn snapped sharply, "Garvey?"

Ed McLain felt the sweat break out on his face. Buck Kramer was less than a yard away from him on his left, and Kramer was close enough to recognize his voice if he spoke now. He was positive the man he'd knocked down in the brush was Garvey.

No one answered Rayburn, and the big man said softly, "We'll have a light here, Kramer."

Buck Kramer swore, and then a match flared up in the rain. Gripping the sixgun, Ed lunged for Kramer, pushing with the gun and his free hand. He knocked the Flying K foreman off his feet, sending him into two other men.

He started to run then, zig-zagging, running in the general direction of the river. A gun roared behind him, and then another. One bullet tugged at the slicker, the other

one went wild. They continued to fire. Ed hit the river, running into it at full speed, splashing knee-deep for several steps. He heard a man yell, "He's goin' in the water."

Then he came out again, running low along the bank. He took a long, low dive forward on his face and started to crawl forward. He heard Ben Rayburn roar, "Bring a light up here. Bring a light!"

They were shooting wildly at shadows in the river as Ed crawled rapidly away through the darkness. Someone ran down to the river's edge with a flaming torch of old newspapers they'd found in the shack.

ED McLAIN saw the light as he gathered up the reins of the sorrel, climbed into the saddle, and walked the horse downriver. He took a deep breath then, realizing his actions had been on the foolhardy side. He'd hoped to learn, by association with Rayburn's men, the exact spot where the sheep would be crossed, Rayburn's coincidental order to the man Ed had knocked down threw this plan out of kilter. They would have to guess where Rayburn would cross, and hope he would take the easy ford near the No. 3 shack.

Half an hour later, Ed found George Wing and the Flying K riders waiting back along the river behind the No. 3 shack. Wing saw him coming up in the rain and he shouted, "Hey—Smith!"

Ed swung in. He heard cattle moving somewhere behind Wing. Another rider was with Wing.

"You all right?" Wing asked solicitously. "We heard them shots up the river an' we figured you was ready for buryin'."

"They riddled our shack," Ed laughed. "I wasn't in it at the time. How many head do you have here?"

The man with Wing said grimly, "We brought up three hundred head. Where in hell is Buck Kramer?"

"He was with Rayburn last time I saw him," Ed said evenly. "That make sense?"

Several other Flying K men were coming up out of the night, their horses sloshing in the mud.

George Wing said quietly, "Reckon Kramer's gone 'sheep', boys. This hombre's takin' over an' we figure on stoppin' Rayburn's move tonight. Kramer pulled all the gunnies away from the river, leavin' it open."

There were several moments of silence, and then a man spoke up from the rear, "What about this cattle?"

"I want to know where Rayburn intends to make his crossing," Ed explained. "When we see the sheep going into the river we drive this stock out to block them off. We'll have to fight off Rayburn's toughs if he sends them

across. It'll be a hell of a tough deal."

"What about Miss Kimbrough?" another man wanted to know.

George Wing answered this. "Reckon Miss Kimbrough don't want them sheep on Flyin' K range," he said. "She's kind o' busy gettin' married tonight. We'll tell her about it in the mornin'." He said softly to Ed, "Or is she gettin' married tonight?"

"I wouldn't know," Ed told him innocently. He gave the order for the men to spread up and down the river and indicate with a shot where Rayburn was coming over. He stayed with Wing in the vicinity of the No. 3 shack.

It was still raining, coming down steadily, drenching the earth, running in tiny rivulets into the Crow. Ed sat astride the sorrel and stared across the river. Vaguely, he could make out the other bank and the line of trees along the shore.

Wing said briefly, "Ben's got his whole fortune tied up in them sheep. He's got to get 'em across tonight 'cause the little grass on the other side is about gone."

Ed nodded. "It'll be a fight," he admitted. "How deep is the river along here?"

"Maybe a foot," Wing told him. "Sheep kin walk right across if you let 'em."

Ed McLain glanced at his watch. It was past eleven o'clock now. He rode up the river and passed one of the Flying K watchers. The puncher stared at him under the brim of his dripping hat, but didn't say anything. Two hundred yards up from the No. 3 shack another man was watching the dark water, and then Ed heard the faint bleating and the mingled sounds in the distance. The puncher said, "Comin' up now." He spat into the water.

"You want us to bring them cattle up, mister?"

"We'll wait," Ed advised, "until Rayburn has his sheep in the water. He'll have some point riders up ahead of his flock. If they see the cattle they'll hold up the sheep and make an attempt farther downstream."

He gave orders for Wing to get his riders behind the cattle and hold them in readiness. He pulled his own horse back in among the willows and waited as the sounds increased across the river. He held the sixgun under the slicker and he rubbed the blue barrel with his fingertips.

A horse went into the water directly across the river. He could hear the animal splashing, and then he saw the wave of murky white moving down the sloping banks.

Two riders were crossing ahead of the flock, and Ed picked them out in the darkness as they emerged from the river, moving straight toward him. An unending line of white moved down into the water, spreading out, hesitant before making the crossing.

One of the point riders passed within a

dozen yards of Ed as he sat among the willows, the sorrel motionless. The bleating of the sheep filled the night now, and Ed was sure even Leah Kimbrough could hear it several miles away at the ranch house.

Shouting, cursing men were working on the other side, trying to get the sheep into the water. They were spreading farther and farther along the banks on either side, and then a narrow wedge began to move out into midstream. Others followed, and then the entire wave moved.

Ed McLain lifted his sixgun and fired once into the air. He heard a whoop down near the No. 3 shack and he jumped the sorrel out of the willows just as one of Rayburn's point riders sent a hurried shot toward the spot.

Ed picked out the man twenty yards away. He shot at the flash of the man's gun and he saw a horse dash away with the rider slumped in the saddle. Behind him he heard the whooping and the firing as the Flying K riders got the herd moving.

The second point rider who had gone north to explore the shore came dashing back now, shouting across the river. He was still standing there when the Flying K stock pounded out of the brush, heading straight for the water.

ED HAD backed away to avoid the frightened cattle. He saw the Rayburn man fire his gun rapidly to turn the stock, but others came on in the rear, charging blindly through the rain. The point rider frantically headed out into the water and Ed tried to shout the warning to him, but it was too late. His horse could not move fast enough in the foot-deep stream and the Flying K steers hit him from all directions.

There was a wild, frightened scream as horse and rider went down under driving hoofs. The three hundred cattle hit the water with a terrific rush, Flying K riders moving behind them, spurring them on. They tore in among the sheep out in midstream, piling them up in the water.

The sheep behind the first wave were still moving down the banks toward the water, moving blindly, those in the rear pushing up, creating a terrific jam.

Ed spotted George Wing coming up, slapping his hat at a few cattle straggling into the water. He yelled at Wing, "Take five of the boys up to the end of the line. Rayburn will try to cross now and break us up."

Wing shouted, picked up his men and spurred away in the rain. Ed took the remaining men, dismounted them fifty yards downstream where the line of sheep had thinned out, and waited.

A half-dozen woollies had managed to edge around the wildly threshing cattle out in the

river. They came up the banks and chased away into the brush. Ed let them go. He gripped his sixgun and waited.

The bleating of the sheep and the bellowing of the cattle filled the night. Some of Rayburn's men had pushed down among the sheep and were shooting wildly at the Flying K stock, now hopelessly entangled in the massed wall of sheep.

A man was shouting from the other bank, and then Ed saw the line of horsemen coming across the river. They spread out when they reached mid-stream. Ed stood up.

"Stay on your side, Rayburn," he yelled.

A slug whined over his head, and then the Flying K punchers opened up. Two men slipped from their saddles and fell into the water. A half-dozen others kept coming, driving up out of the water.

Ed McLain dropped one man. The Flying K men had retreated in among the willows and were firing steadily, their guns flashing orange in the falling rain.

Four more Rayburn men followed the first group, dropping to the ground when they hit the east bank of the river, crawling up toward the few Flying K men firing from the brush.

Crouching behind a tree, Ed unloaded his gun and then reloaded it again. A hoarse-voiced man yelled, "Split up. We'll get behind 'em."

It was the voice of Buck Kramer. Ed spotted the blocky man running directly toward his tree. He was hatless, his wide face streaming water, black hair plastered to his head.

Ed yelled suddenly, "Morrell, they're coming this way!"

Kramer pulled up and Ed dropped to the ground. Kramer's gun roared twice, and Ed fired at the flashes. He heard the sharp intake of Kramer's breath as the man dropped, and then he heard Kramer crawling painfully away.

The Rayburn men were still trying to work their way closer to the willows when George Wing's party roared down from the other end of the line, firing as they came.

Again Ed McLain roared, "Come on, Morrell!"

Rayburn's toughs broke ground and raced into the river on foot. Ed could hear them splashing all the way across the shallow fording place. George Wing threw himself out of the saddle near Ed. He yelled excitedly, "Jonas Morrell down here with us?"

Ed smiled. "You see him?" he asked.

"Somebody was yellin' his name," Wing muttered.

"Could have been the wind," Ed said. More sheep were coming up the banks now, scattered groups, and the Flying K riders spread out to chase them back into the river. The push had stopped over on the other bank, and

the woollies were moving downstream, avoiding the water now.

For the next half-hour Ed kept the Flying K men busy riding up and down along the river's edge, driving sheep back into the water. George Wing said once,

"Rayburn's come across with his boys?"

"He's too smart for that," Ed said. "He was paying men for that dirty job."

When the last of Rayburn's flock was driven back into the Crow, Ed said to Wing, "Keep the boys down here in case they make another attempt. I'm heading back for the ranch."

"They're licked," Wing grinned, "an' Rayburn knows it."

ED McLAIN thought that over as he sent the sorrel at a fast trot in the direction of the Flying K ranch house. The rain was slowing down now.

He pulled up near the bunkhouse and listened to the water dripping from the roof. The moon was trying to break through a rift in the clouds. He saw a horse tied near the corral, and then a shadow moved across the porch.

Silently, Ed drifted in the direction, of the porch, coming up behind the corral. He heard a sharp rapping on the door, and then a patch of yellow light fell across the hulking shape of Ben Rayburn standing just outside.

The man in the doorway was Jonas Morrell. Rayburn made no attempt to go in. His elbows were tight at his sides, his back toward Ed, and from the position of the man Ed knew he held a gun in his hand.

Rayburn's husky voice reached Ed very clearly. Rayburn was saying evenly, "That was a cheap lawyer's trick, Morrell—a very neat double-cross."

Jonas Morrell's perplexed, "What?" was very weak.

"So you married into Flying K," Rayburn said tersely, "and you thought you'd break me and get every rancher in the county solidly behind you for stopping a sheepman."

Leah Kimbrough called from the interior of the house, "Who is that, Jonas?"

Ed McLain didn't know whether the girl heard Ben Rayburn's next statement. Rayburn spoke softly, the words distinct to Ed.

"Reckon this is the old man with the scythe; ma'am, making you a widow."

A sound was jerked from Morrell's throat. It was not a word; it was a kind of protest lost in the roar of Rayburn's sixgun. Ben Rayburn fired twice.

Ed McLain saw Morrell double up and fall forward, clutching at his stomach. His forehead hit the porch floor inches from Rayburn's feet. Ed walked up quietly until he

was within fifteen feet of Rayburn. He said softly, "All right, Ben. Finish it up."

He dropped to his knees then, surprised at the big man's incredible speed. Rayburn came around like a huge cat, his sixgun spitting flame.

Ed fired once and he saw Rayburn's head jerk back as if someone had thrown a rope around his neck and yanked at him. The head came forward again, and then Ben Rayburn reached forward for the porch pillar on the right side of the steps.

He missed the pillar by a full foot and he plunged off the porch, landing in the mud with a splash.

Ed McLain mechanically ejected the spent shell from the gun. He was still standing there, looking at Rayburn, at Morrell huddled on the porch floor, when Leah Kimbrough appeared in the doorway, the light of the lamps inside shining through her copper-colored hair. She did not say anything, but she started to sway, and Ed ran to catch her.

Bright morning sunlight came through the rain-streaked windows of the Flying K living room as Ed McLain sat on the couch near the piano, hat in hands, twirling it aimlessly.

Doc Forbes, from Talbot, came out of a room nearby and nodded. He said, "You can go in and talk to her now."

Ed found Leah Kimbrough sitting up in the bed, face pale and drawn. She tried to smile at him, but it failed. She said quietly, "I'll listen to your story now."

Ed started from the beginning with the interruption of Morrell's visit with Ben Rayburn in the gulch. He told her of Morrell's attempt to buy him off in the office, and then of the fight down at the river.

When he finished Leah Kimbrough said quietly, "I suspected something last night. We heard shots in the distance and I wanted to go down. Jonas insisted that we stay and wait for the minister."

"He never showed up," Ed said solicitously.

"No," the girl said. She looked at him closely, but Ed's blank face revealed nothing.

"The boys found Buck Kramer's body on the other side of the river," Ed told her. "He managed to get across."

Leah Kimbrough said, "I'll be needing a new foreman, Mr. Smith."

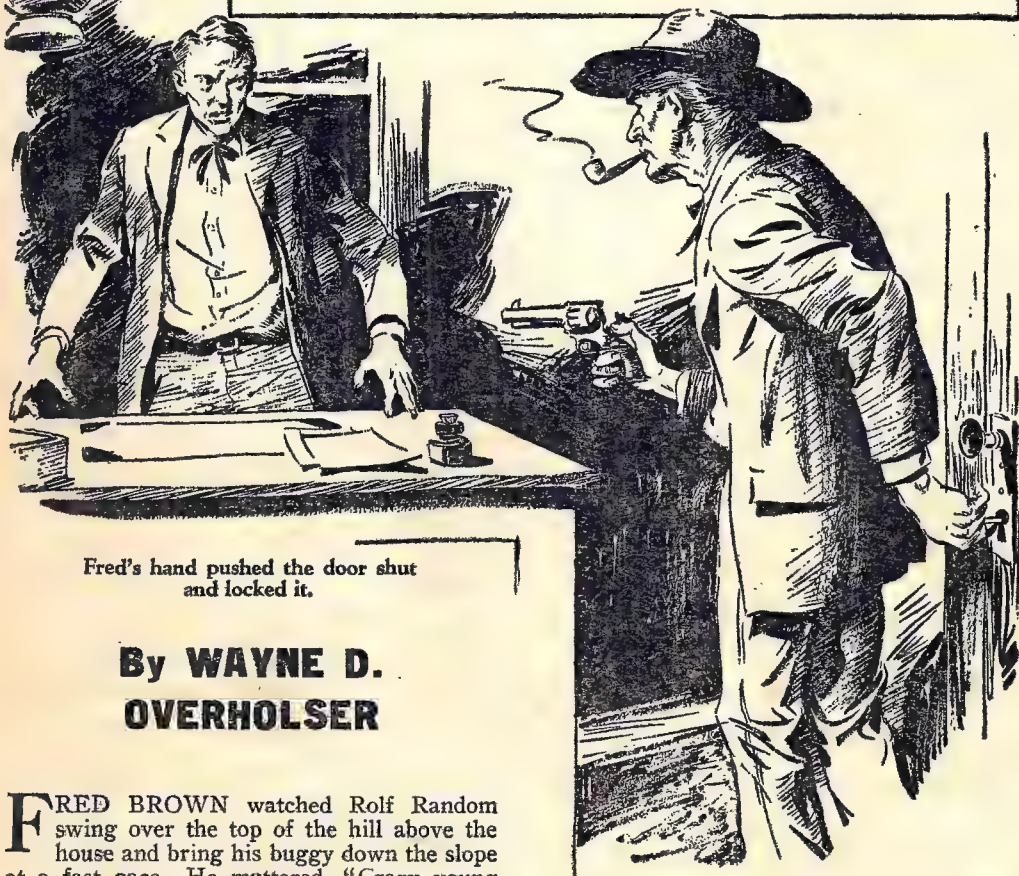
"The name," Ed said, "is McLain, and I'm looking for an honest job."

The girl stared at him thoughtfully for some time. She said then, "I'm glad of that, Mr. McLain, for your sake."

Ed got up to go. He said quietly, "Reckon I'll start giving orders now. You'll stay in bed for two days."

Leah Kimbrough said, "It—it's a pleasure taking orders from you, Mr. McLain."

OLD LAWDOGS NEVER DIE



Fred's hand pushed the door shut
and locked it.

By **WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER**

FRED BROWN watched Rolf Random swing over the top of the hill above the house and bring his buggy down the slope at a fast pace. He muttered, "Crazy young fool," and wondered if Nancy had heard.

Funny thing about Rolf and Nancy. She'd had the pick of a dozen eligibles in Rimrock basin, even Deacon Wells' son Arch, and not one had given her heart the least hint of a flip. Then young Rolf showed up, bought the Ashton place, and decided Nancy was for him. Nancy had the same notion about Rolf. She'd taken his diamond the second week she'd known him, and she'd been doing the housework from a cloud bank ever since.

Yet Fred couldn't be sure. It didn't make any difference about himself. He'd miss Nancy all right when she got married next month and moved over the hill to the Ashton place. He'd have to eat his own cooking, which wasn't what you'd call good, but when a man hits

Old Fred Brown had two valued possessions: a silver star for his life's work as a hard-riding lawman, and a walnut-handled Colt .44 with which he aimed to close forever a lying mouth—and blow to hell and sky-high glory his own hard-won reputation!

his middle sixties and has had so many bullets pass through him that his hide looks like a perforated pin cushion, he hasn't many years left. There was nothing Fred wanted now, really, but happiness for Nancy. If Rolf could give it to her, then she had to have him.

Fred hobbled in to the house and stood for a moment in Nancy's doorway. She was sitting before the mirror, giving her black hair a last-minute touch. Fred, watching her, felt pride swell up in him until he was ready to bust. He never could understand how he could have fathered a girl like this daughter of his. Shapely, dark-eyed, Nancy Brown in her new blue print would be the prettiest girl at the dance just as she had been at every dance for the last five years.

"He's coming, Nancy," Fred said.

She turned from the mirror, her red lips flashing him a quick smile. "And he doesn't like to wait. You go out and entertain him, Dad. He can just get over his impatience before I marry him."

"I don't reckon he'll get over it that quick."

Fred didn't move for a moment, the uncertainty of doubt still in him. There was a job he had to do, but he couldn't do it until he was sure, and Rolf Random did go off half-cocked more times than was good for a man. Once he'd knocked Arch Wells colder than a chunk of jerky on Christmas morning, which might be another reason the deacon had started his tongue wagging about Rolf.

"Go on, Dad." Nancy had turned from the mirror. "He's almost to the gate."

"Now, Nancy. . . ."

She smiled again, amused at the sudden seriousness in his eyes, and crossed the room to him. She smelled pretty, he thought. Doggone it, she was pretty. If Rolf Random wasn't the man he claimed to be, or if there was any truth to the words deacon had been swinging his tongue over, then—but Fred put the notion out of his head. It would be too late to save Nancy's happiness. Besides, Fred had lived through the days when things like this could be settled by bullets.

He said slowly, his gray eyes locked with her dark ones, "Are you sure Rolf's the man?"

She nodded, suddenly sober. "Awfully sure, Dad. I've read books about girls falling in love and being full of crazy daydreams and all that. I always laughed about it, but now I'm as crazy as any of them. That's exactly the way I feel about Rolf."

"That's fine, honey," Fred said, and hobbling back to the front gate, reached it just as Rolf wheeled into the yard and pulled up with a grand flourish.

"Howdy," Rolf called amiably. "You know, Fred, time's going backwards with you. You're younger than the first time I saw you."

"Been eating bear meat," Fred said. "Ten

pounds a day. Raw." He shook his head. "Sure does things to a man."

"I'll have to try that treatment."

"The way you put Nancy into another world, you don't need any treatment," Fred said dryly.

Rolf grinned. "You think she likes me, Fred?"

"She's sure putting up a good job of play-acting if she don't," Fred grunted.

HE WAS a likeable, fine-looking man, this Rolf Random, dressed up in his store suit and wearing a white shirt. He had his new, pearl-gray Stetson cocked at a rakish angle, and his brown eyes had the light of a thousand devils in them. Nancy might not have an even-tenored life with Rolf Random, but she'd have an interesting one.

"I'll bet you're feeling so frisky you'll be getting that silver star of yours out and polishing it up," Rolf said. "The way I hear it, you killed Indians and rustlers and tough hands of one kind and another for years around here."

"Had quite a time," Fred conceded. Sometimes he thought Rolf poured it on a little thick, but maybe it was just the boy's way. He busied himself filling his pipe, and wondered if Rolf had heard any of the deacon's gossip.

"Gave you a silver star and made you permanent sheriff, emeritus or ex-officio or whatever it is."

"Nope, they just gave me a silver star and pensioned me," Fred said a little sourly. The memory of it still prodded him to a dull-edged anger when he let himself think about it. "I got my left knee jimmied up in that scrap with the Godine outfit, and I wasn't no good after that. Couldn't ride like I used to, so they shoved me over for a younger man. That's the way it goes, Rolf."

If Rolf caught the bitterness in Fred's tone, he gave no sign. He said, "Say, I guess it was a hell of a fight you had with that bunch. Almost wiped 'em out, didn't you?"

"Not quite."

"I hear what's left of the outfit is back operating across the Snake."

Fred looked at Rolf closely now. That was another of the things the deacon had started about Rolf, that he was an undercover man for the Godine bunch, and he'd bought the Ashton place as a hideout for them.

"None of my concern now."

Nancy came floating out of the house then, a rapt, faraway look on her face. Fred had never seen anything like it until she'd started going with Rolf. And Rolf had the same kind of a look. He stepped down and helped Nancy into the buggy. Then for a minute they just looked at each other.

"This here is fall and we'll have some win-

ter in another month or two," Fred said. "Folks are supposed to fall in love in the spring."

They came out of it then, and grinned sheepishly. Rolf climbed in beside Nancy. He said, "Why don't you come with us, Fred? Plenty of room here in the buggy for three of us."

"Why don't you, Dad?" Nancy urged. "You haven't been to town for a long time."

That did it. Fred got busy with his pipe. He was all choked for a moment so he couldn't answer. A grand pair of kids. They really meant what they said. They'd throw away these sacred moments together just to give an old has-been a ride to town so he wouldn't be lonely.

"Aw, you ain't got need of a fifth wheel on that there buggy." Fred walked back to the porch. "You kids go on and have a good time."

"Fred, you might just as well—" Rolf began.

"Let him alone," Nancy cut in. "He's notionate as the weather and as stubborn as a mule."

"Quit insulting me or I'll tan you." Fred waved toward town. "Go on now or you'll miss the first dance."

Fred sat there on the porch until they were out of sight, pulling more fiercely on his pipe than was his habit. Then, when it was empty, he knocked it out against his bootheel, and looked up at the darkening sky. He was not a man to analyze his own emotions, and only lately had his thoughts turned inward. He had married when he was forty, too late to get married if a man wanted to see his grandchildren.

Somewhere off to the south it had rained, and sage was a spice smell in the air. The wind breathed through the poplars above him, and he heard the dry, lifeless whisper of leaves that would soon be dropped. That was the place he had reached: dry and almost lifeless and already dropped as far as Rimrock county went. He had never thought about these things when he'd been the law, when he'd lived with a horse between his legs and the sky for a roof.

It was different now. He couldn't ride very far. His right wrist was too stiff to make a fast draw. He was even getting a little nearsighted. He had a silver star and an income of fifty dollars a month for life. He grinned a little then. Deacon Wells had yelled his head off when the county court gave him that fifty dollars. Said a man who had worked as long as Fred had should have enough saved.

Fred went into the house and took his gun out of his top bureau drawer: a .44 Colt, long-barreled and walnut-handled. He'd never been a fast-draw gunslick, but he'd been a good shot, able to shoot the buffalo off a nickel a good

deal farther than he could even see the nickel now. That wasn't important for this job. What he had to do would take neither a fast draw nor good shooting. He stood for a moment beside his window in the fast-dwindling twilight, checking the action and feeling pleasure in having the gun again in his hand.

He thought about Nancy and Rolf. It wouldn't make any difference with Nancy's decision to marry Rolf next month if she did hear Deacon Wells' gossip. She would rise to his defense and she'd be loyal. She'd be his wife and she'd have his kids and she'd take care of his house and patch his clothes. Sure, she'd do all of that, but Nancy deserved more. She deserved a marriage she could enter without doubt of her man, without mental reservation, and she would not have it if this talk of Deacon Wells' went unchecked.

Slipping the gun into his waistband, Fred pulled on his coat and left the house, walking more rapidly than was his habit these days. He threw gear on his horse, and took the town road.

IT WAS after nine before he rode into Rimrock, and he saw, with considerable relief, that there was still a light in Wells' office. Fred racked his mount, listened a moment to the music that came along the street from the lodge hall, and then buttoning his coat so his gun wouldn't show, stepped into Wells' office. Wells was there talking to a farmer from the upper basin. When he saw Fred, he frowned, and kept on talking to the farmer.

"I don't know why you had to bring this in cash money," Wells said in a fretted tone. "The bank won't be open till nine o'clock in the morning, and my safe isn't big enough to be dependable."

"Carry it on you," the farmer snapped. "Anyway, you know you wouldn't have taken a check, Wells. I sold my wheat in Walla Walla, and I brought the cash money along because I ain't taking no chances on you running a shenanigan on me and crooking me out of my place."

"All right, all right," Wells snapped a rubber band around the roll of bills, and dropped them into his pocket. "I'm just not anxious to have this much cash on me with the Godine bunch in the country."

Fred stood by the door, a gaunt, stoop-shouldered man, his gray mustache hiding the small smile that struck at the corners of his mouth. Deacon Wells had sold real estate and loaned money for a quarter of a century, long enough for people to know his real caliber. Then the smile faded. No matter how thoroughly folks knew Wells, they still passed along his gossip that grew with the telling.

When the farmer had gone, Wells stood up. "It's late, and I was just going home, Brown.

I presume you could come back in the morning?"

"I presume I can't," Fred said, and pushing the door shut, locked it and dropped the key into his pocket.

"Give me that key," Wells said sharply. "Man, are you crazy?"

"Why, sure," Fred grunted. "I'm crazy as a meadowlark whistling a funeral march. Sit down, Deacon. We've got talk to make."

Fred pulled up a chair, and sat down across the desk from Wells. The insurance man glared down at Fred. He was a long-jawed, slim-faced man whose cold, black eyes were set so close together that folks in Rimrock said his pupils could swap eyes without even making him blink.

Reluctantly Wells dropped into a chair, not sure what this was about and showing the uneasiness it aroused in him. "Maybe you'd better explain this unprecedented action," he said sourly.

"All right, Deacon. I was wondering about your boy Arch. He used to be mighty interested in my Nancy, but lately he ain't been coming around."

Fred said it as if he were disappointed. He dribbled tobacco into his pipe, watching Wells from under bushy brows, and he caught the keen interest that rose quickly in Wells.

"You can't blame Arch, Fred," Wells said. "He asked Nancy to marry him, but she put him off. Then she started wearing this stranger Random's ring, and naturally Arch quit trying to see her."

"So that's what happened?" He was very self-effacing, was Fred Brown in that moment as he slipped his tobacco can back into his pocket. "I've been wondering about this Random fellow. Hate to see Nancy marry him if he ain't just what he should be. You know anything about him?"

"Why no, I don't," Wells said guardedly.

Fred leaned forward, his unlighted pipe held in his hand. "Deacon, within the last week five men have stopped at my place to pass on some gossip about Rolf. One of 'em said he'd served time in the Salem pen. Another one had heard he had a wife and six kids in Baker. Three of these fellers claimed he was a member of the Godine gang and had bought the Ashton place so they'd have a handy hide-out." Fred paused, his eyes pinned on Wells' colorless face. "Deacon, every mother's son of them gossiping old male hens said they got their yarns from you."

"It's a lie," Wells squalled. "Now you get out, Brown. You've got no business coming in here and making accusations like that."

Fred's left hand dropped his pipe into his pocket as his right snaked inside his coat and jerked gun, the coat swinging wide. The gun muzzle lined squarely on the third button of

Wells' shirt and stayed there, never wavering.

Wells went slack as if the starch had gone suddenly from him. He said hoarsely, "You know I've got this money, Brown, but I didn't think you'd rob me of it."

"You'll worry about how you're going to sneak your dinero into Hell," Fred said contemptuously. "I don't want the damned stuff. I just want to know what facts there are behind those tales."

"I didn't tell anything of the kind," Wells said doggedly.

"You'll squeeze a penny till you get a war whoop out of the Indian, you'll lie as often as you'll tell the truth, and you'll smash a man's reputation just to get even. Otherwise you ain't so bad. Maybe you're after Rolf because he got Nancy, or maybe because he licked hell out of your kid, but I'm telling you one thing and I want you to get it straight. I ain't one to stand by while you kick Rolf around and maybe wreck Nancy's happiness."

He was a cold, scheming man, was Deacon Wells, in whom the natural milk of human kindness had been strained to a thin, colorless substance. He weighed this situation now, staring at Fred through carefully masked eyes. Slowly fear began to have its way with him, for Fred's weatherbeaten face had become merciless and cold. He blurted, "Brown, you've never liked me, but that's no reason to kill me, is it?"

"I ain't aiming to kill you if you tell the truth and do what I tell you, but you're sure gonna clean this mess up you started. Sometimes I think you're the ma of that boy Arch. You sure act like a woman."

"All right." Breath came in a gusty sweep from Deacon Wells. "I started those stories to bust your girl and Random up. Arch is crazy about Nancy."

"And you want to fix it so your kid gets what he wants." Fred nodded. "I can see that, Deacon, 'cause it's the same way I feel about Nancy. Only thing is she wants Rolf and she's gonna get a man whose name ain't mucked up by a gabbing coyote like you. We're taking a walk over to the dance."

SLOWLY Wells got to his feet, his eyes narrowed, thin lips a long line across his face. "Why are we going to the dance?"

Fred rose and unlocked the door. "You're gonna tell folks what you just told me. I reckon it'll be the quickest way of getting this business straight."

"I won't do it" Wells squealed.

There was a moment of silence, nerve-tight, pregnant silence that Fred let run on, the minutes piling up, until Deacon Wells was close to breaking. Fred said, "You're afraid to die," and pronged back the hammer of his gun, the sound an ominous click riding the

silence. Then Fred added, slowly, "You've seen me kill men because I was sheriff of Rimrock county, and I had to do it. Now you'll do what I told you to, or I'll kill you because I'm Nancy's father, and I'm going to be Rolf's daddy-in-law."

"They'll hang you."

"Now mebbe they will, but I'd as soon have it that way as to let you keep on talking. If you're dead, or if you tell folks how big a liar you are, your tongue will stop wagging about Rolf. It's going to be one way or the other."

Sweat broke in tiny globules through the skin of Deacon Wells' face and made a bright shine in the lamplight. His tongue ran over dry lips. He started to say something, but the words died in his throat. Suddenly he turned, and moved across the room toward the door.

Fred let down the hammer of his gun. He slid it back into his waistband, and with one hand on gun butt, came up to Wells so that he was only a pace behind him. He said, "Don't try to give the high sign to Arch or anybody who might feel like earning one of your dirty dollars. Just go up the stairs to the lodge hall, get everybody's attention, and speak your piece."

Wells nodded. They moved along the walk until they were opposite the lodge hall, and swung sharply towards it. Fred, in whom old habits clung tenaciously, noted the horses in the street, the men on the boardwalk. One was holding the reins, the others were smoking. There was no talking. It wasn't like a bunch of ordinary punchers taking a smoke outside before they came up for a dance. Then Fred, because his mind was full of this other thing, followed Wells up the stairs and into the hall.

There was a crowd, as there always was for these dances. Fred and Wells came in during the middle of a waltz, and they waited beside the door until it was over. A man yelled at Fred, "Your leg must be feeling purty good if you're fixing to get into this stepping."

"Fitter'n a fiddle string," Fred answered.

That was when the four men came in, and Fred saw, in his first quick glance, that it was the Godine bunch. Buck-toothed Jake was in front, his brother Ed behind him, the two who had escaped Fred when he'd fought the gang five years ago.

Jake Godine fired a shot into the ceiling, the three others fanning out so that they could cover the people pressed against the walls. Fred felt Deacon Wells stiffen, and curse softly as if remembering the roll of bills in his pocket. Then Fred thought of something else. Nobody carried guns to the dances. Except for the outlaws, he probably had the only gun in the room, but there wasn't the slightest chance of his using it because Ed Godine was

standing in front of him, a cocked Colt in his hand.

"You," Jake Godine jerked a thumb at Rolf, and sailed his Stetson across the room to him. "Start collecting, and don't pass up a nickel."

Fred glimpsed Nancy's stricken face; he heard an "I told you so," along the wall. For a moment Fred Brown couldn't think straight. This wasn't Rolf Random out there collecting watches and money and rings from everybody in the room. It couldn't be. Then something made sense that Fred hadn't thought of before. Deacon Wells had started the talk that Rolf was one of the Godine gang, but how had Wells known?

Fred had been standing against the door jamb, Wells directly in front of him, and all the time Fred had been wondering how he could get his gun out from under his coat and make a fight out of it. Ed Godine had his eyes on him, and Fred thought the outlaw recognized him. If he did, there would be a dead Fred Brown before they left Rimrock. Men like Jake and Ed Godine wouldn't forget what had happened five years before. One thing was certain. If Fred made the slightest attempt to get his gun clear, he'd die now instead of later.

Rolf was slowly moving around the long circle, filling the high-crowned Stetson with money and other valuables, grinning at the cursings he received, and making bantering replies. The Godines were in the middle of the room, dark-garbed, sinister figures. Slowly Rolf worked along the wall until he came to the door, and dipping a hand into Deacon Wells's coat, drew out the fat roll of bills.

"Put it back," Wells hissed. "You ain't supposed to rob me."

Rolf laughed, and held up the roll of bills. "Jackpot, boys. The deacon must have been out robbing some farmer again. He claims he ain't supposed to be robbed."

"He ain't," Ed Godine said. "We ain't taking nothing off poor gents like him. He looks like he needs it."

"Don't know how you get favors like that," Rolf said loudly. He didn't replace the money, and as he shouldered through the crowd to Fred, Wells turned, his narrow face dark with suppressed rage. Rolf took Fred's purse, dropped the old gold watch into the hat, and said jovially, "You should have had your silver star along tonight." He had felt the gun in Fred's waistband, but he hadn't pulled it, and as he put a hand into Fred's coat pocket, his lips were close to Fred's ears. He said softly, "Don't forget you've got that iron."

TOO MANY things were happening to make sense to Fred Brown, but one thing was clear. Deacon Wells himself was into this up to his neck, or he wouldn't be getting any

favors from the Godine bunch. Wells hadn't intended for anybody but Rolf to hear what he'd said but Ed Godine had made a break Deacon Wells would have a hard time explaining when this was over.

Rolf turned toward the center of the room. "Hatful, boys," he called. "Come here and take a look at this diamond. You can quit working now, and set yourselves up in the Argentine with a real spread."

They moved toward him, and still Fred didn't see the play, but he knew there wasn't a diamond in Rimrock basin that would buy a spread in the Argentine. Fred stepped around Wells, his hand slowly lifting his gun, and then things happened. The four outlaws were close to Rolf when he flipped the hat over and the entire contents fell to the floor in a jingling heap.

Jake Godine let out an oath and instinctively the four outlaws scrambled for the loot Rolf had dropped. Fred jerked gun, then, and moved as swiftly as he could toward them. He called, "Hoist 'em in the air, boys. Fun's over with."

Rolf, spinning away from the four, pulled a gun as he barked, "That goes double, Jake. Don't make a move."

The Godines would have been caught in a cross fire if they had elected to fight it out. Slowly guns dropped to the floor and their hands came up. Rolf called, "Nancy, pick this stuff up and give it back to the owners while Fred and me take these boys to the calaboose. Looks like Wells pulled out, but I'll get him."

After the Godines were locked up, Rolf said, "I don't care anything about the kid who held the horses. Maybe this taught him a lesson, but I'm going to get Wells if I have to hunt him from here to Christmas. I knew somebody here was rigging the play for the Godines, but I didn't know who it was till he made that holler about his dinero. Reckon it was Wells who fixed it so the sheriff would be out of town." Rolf chuckled. "Old deacon was a

pious-talking gent, but he couldn't resist the chance to make an extra penny, legal or otherwise."

"Don't look like the pickings from the crowd would have been enough to have made the job worth while," Fred said.

"The idea was to hold folks in the lodge hall while they blowed the bank safe open. With the grain just sold, it would have been a big haul." Rolf started to turn away, and then wheeled back. "Maybe you'd better stay here, Fred, till the sheriff gets back. And tell Nancy why I can't take her home."

"Just who the hell are you?" Fred demanded.

"Trouble-shooter for the governor, assigned to get the Godines. Had to work awhile to get myself fixed up with 'em, but guess I pulled it off."

"They wouldn't need both you and Wells here—"

"Wells just made their plans. I bought the Ashton place so they'd have a hideout that was handy to town. I've got a suspicion that Wells aimed to sell 'em out for the reward, and Jake and Ed will think the same when I tell 'em about Wells saying I was hooked up with 'em. They'll talk."

"Nancy ain't got no business sashaying all over the state while you—"

Rolf's grin was a quick, wide flash across his boyish face. "The governor's going out of office in a few months, so I'm resigning. I kind of like it on the Ashton place. Figured I'd raise a crop of wheat, colts, and kids."

Fred, standing in the doorway of the sheriff's office, watched Rolf disappear down the street. He kind of wished he had his silver star to pin on his shirt. But then it wasn't important. Only two things were important. He wanted Nancy to be happy and he wanted to see his grandchildren. There wasn't any doubt about Nancy's happiness, and if his guess was right, he had a real good chance of seeing what his grandchildren would look like, after all.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Big Book Western Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 4, 1948. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Big Book Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October 1948. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 593-W-8, (My commission expires March 30, 1949.) [Seal]—Form 5526—Ed. 1933.

FREE GRASS— FREE COFFINS

Chapter I

RED HEADS NEVER SAY DIE!

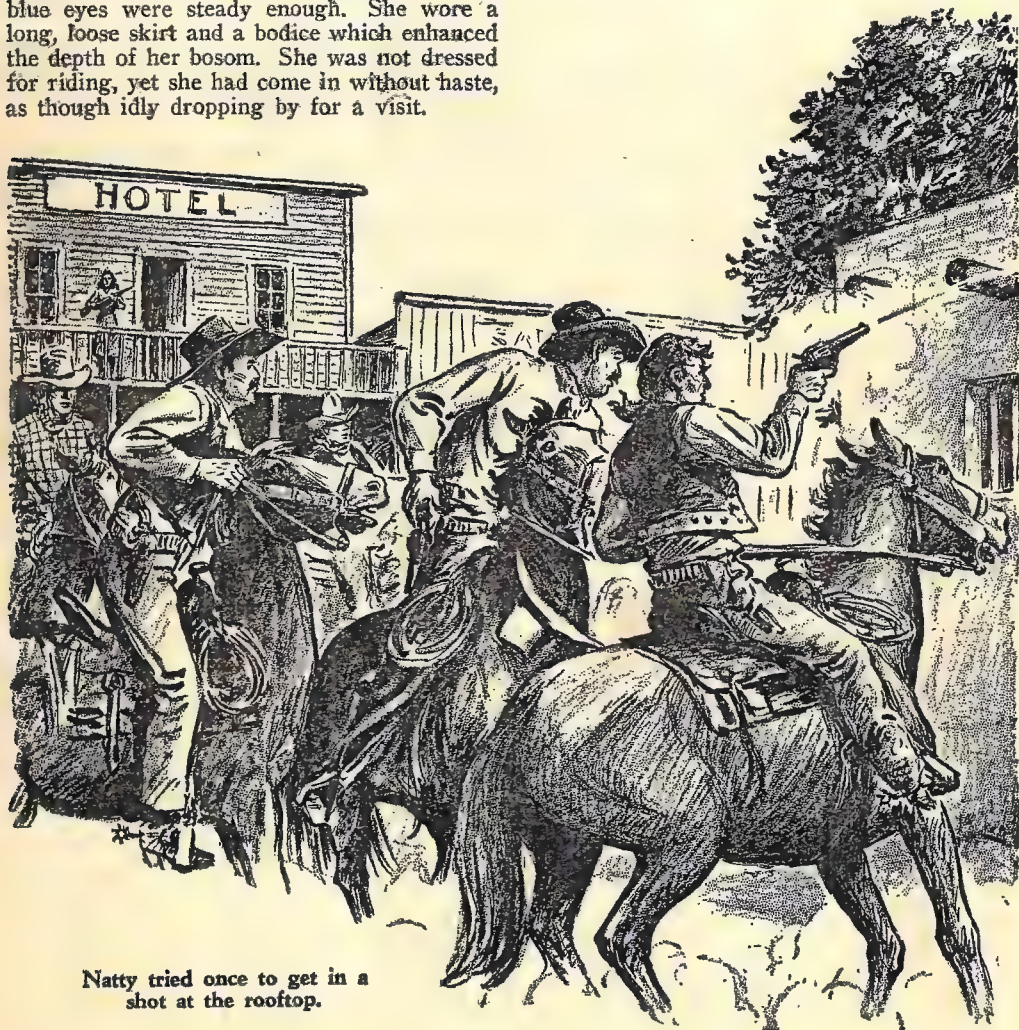
RED CHANDOR removed the battered hat he was wearing to dig post holes in his yard. The girl swung down from a tall chestnut horse. Red's eyes went to the brand on the steed's flank, then to the face of Della Lace. Her cheeks were scarlet, but her blue eyes were steady enough. She wore a long, loose skirt and a bodice which enhanced the depth of her bosom. She was not dressed for riding, yet she had come in without haste, as though idly dropping by for a visit.

She said, "You're really a hard worker, Red."

"My corral got torn down a bit," he said. "Last bunch of hosses were rough."

She said, "You're pretty rough yourself, Red."

His eyes swung back to the brand on the chestnut. It was a sort of Windowsash. It was blotched and ugly and it spread around the

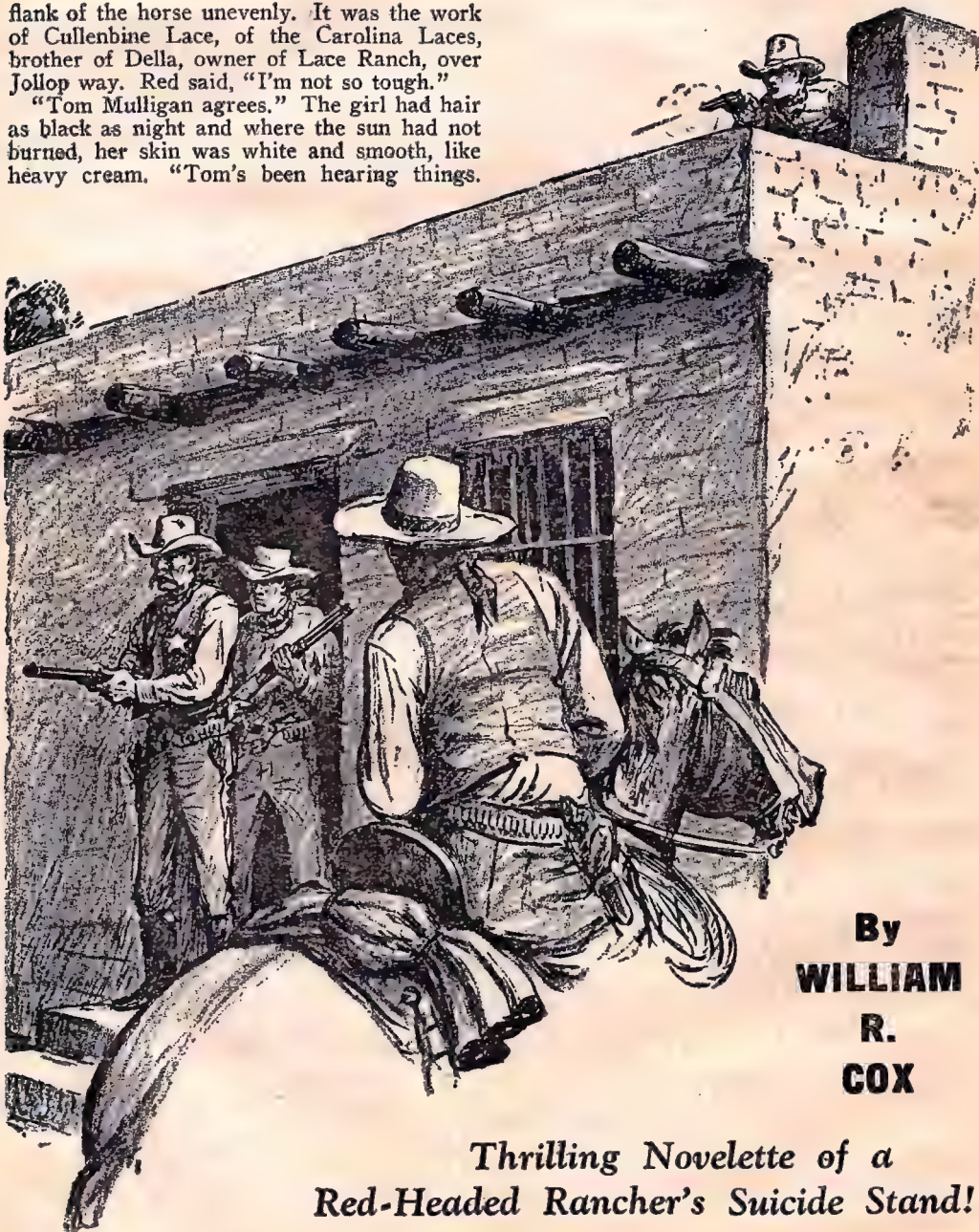


Natty tried once to get in a shot at the rooftop.

How could Red Chandor, lone rancher in range-hog country, hope to stem the crimson tide of graze-grabbing, when the gun-hand of every honest cowman was paralyzed by fear, and the price of free range was an equally free grave?

flank of the horse unevenly. It was the work of Cullenbine Lace, of the Carolina Laces, brother of Della, owner of Lace Ranch, over Jollop way. Red said, "I'm not so tough."

"Tom Mulligan agrees." The girl had hair as black as night and where the sun had not burned, her skin was white and smooth, like heavy cream. "Tom's been hearing things."



By
**WILLIAM
R.
COX**

*Thrilling Novelette of a
Red-Headed Rancher's Suicide Stand!*

He's heading for Far Hills tonight, to talk to you."

Red sank the spade in the firm earth and left it there, the handle pointing to the sky. It was a symbol of his energy and tireless labor, of the patient years he had put into DD Ranch, building it to a modest success, almost alone, bucking the Jollop crowd. He said mildly, "Well, I'll be there."

The girl dropped her pretense. Her face tightened and she said, "Red, why must you? Always fighting, defying the world. Why not sell out to Tom? It's not so bad. Cull gets more out of our place since we sold. Natty Blue spends his time playing poker in town and Tom pays him his share. Tom knows how to get better prices. He does business in a big way; he's a big man. . . ."

Red said, "He thinks he's a big man, all right. He means to have you too, you know, Della. How about that? You like that?"

She was whipcord lean in the flanks, like a good pony, and she strode forward with her hand poised to slap him. He caught her and swung her around and she went all soft, clinging to him, sobbing, "Tom outweighs you fifty pounds, darling. I can't stand him beating you, too. He's beaten everyone else who dared cross him. I can't stand for him—he uses the boots, Red. He'll kick you to death—because—because of me."

He said nothing. He was never a man to deny a truth. He soothed her and she straightened, regaining her icy control. She said, "I don't know if I can wait until Autumn for us to marry."

He turned and they both stared at the house. It needed shingles and a coat of paint, and inside it lacked comfortable furniture. The hard years, with cattle selling for next to nothing, had taken their toll of Red Chandor's slim resources. He said stubbornly, "You can't come home to this. I'm workin'. I'll be bringin' in a batch of wild ones and we'll see. Government is payin' mighty good prices for hosses up to standard. And I got that batch of fat steers up in the north field. Come Fall, we'll be able to fix things. If all goes well."

She said tautly, "If Tom Mulligan doesn't kill you tonight."

"Well, there's always that," he said. His eyes were green. They collided with hers, stormy, rebuking her for lack of faith.

She stepped away and leaped into the saddle of the chestnut before he could extend a helping hand. She said, "There is no use talking to you, Red Chandor. But please, at least carry a gun into town tonight."

He smiled at her. "I'll be over to visit tomorrow." She rode away without further words. He watched her go and the hand he extended to the spade handle was not quite steady.

His resolution was staunch enough, however. He did not remove the spade after all. He left it standing and went into the house. It was growing late on a Saturday afternoon and a man could work with profit just so many hours. He got a towel and some soap and went down to the brook and stripped.

RED CHANDOR was a man with smooth muscles up and down his back, and his biceps were steel springs. His flesh was solid and ruddy. He was heavier than he appeared, and the strength of his forearms was apparent as he lathered himself with the harsh soap. His hair was dully red, almost auburn, and there were freckles on his snub-nosed face.

He went back to the house and a man was sitting a horse in the yard with one leg hung over the pommel, slack, almost disinterested. It was Sheriff Hack Lee, a man whose drooping mustache seemed to typify his disposition. He said in a monotone, "Howdy, Red. I jest heard Mulligan was comin' over to Far Hills t'night. Whenever he rides to Far Hills there is trouble. I hear tonight it's you. Don't tote no gun."

Red said, "What's the matter, Hack, you gettin' the cowtown marshal habit? Don't tell me not to tote no gun."

"Mulligan fights with his fists. That's fair," said the sheriff. "Gun-fights leads to killin' and killin' leads to co't house doin's. Don't like it."

Red said, "Mulligan's got a dozen riders and his slave ranchers to side him. Natty Blue carries iron. Cull Lace wears a hide-out and stays drunk, mostly. And you want me to go agin them unarmed!"

The sheriff said, "You been tellin' it around Cull Lace stole a hoss. You been sayin' Tom means to run everybody outa Jaguar County and rule it his own way. Seems to me you been lookin' for this."

The towel around his middle, Red spread his feet and jutted his chin at the lawman. He said, "Listen, you hand-shakin', baby-kissin', mealy-mouthed brother, you get the hell outa my yard and off my land and stay off until you got a warrant. You show your nose around whilst I'm fightin' Tom Mulligan, or anybody else, and try to interfere and I'll lay the first one, if it's lead or if it's fists, right into your belly. Pin that in your fancy hat, you joke sheriff, and don't never forget it."

He turned and walked into the house. The sheriff did not leave at once, but neither did he make a move on the horse's back. He finished his cigarette, slid his eyes around the neat but homely environs of DD Ranch. Then he finally clucked to his horse and slowly rode off to the road which ran both ways, eastward to Far Hills and westward to the livelier town of Jollop.

Red Chandor put on a pair of striped pants and a dark blue shirt. He paused to roll a cigarette in brown paper, his fingers shaking a little with passion. It had been bad enough with the sheriff playing a hands-off game in the county, pretending to be neutral while Tom Mulligan went around talking about cooperation and harassing the small ranchers until they sold him a half interest, for a nominal sum, in their holdings. Now he was openly siding Mulligan. . . .

He blew smoke through his nose and donned his boots. They were low-heeled walking boots for town, glove soft. He let the trouser leg stay outside the tops, shaking out the creases, for he was a neat man.

He took down the heavy cartridge belt with its worn holster and .44 Colt revolver. He adjusted the harness and it went naturally to its place athwart his hips. Once, long ago, he had trailed up to Abilene and roistered through the cowtowns with the best of them, and no one had ever beaten him to the draw. He threw the gun a few times and the old habit came back. He was quick enough to fight anyone in Jaguar County or anywhere else, he expected.

Tom Mulligan was smart for a big man. That cooperative talk—that had really got some of them. Then, when the gang from the hills allegedly stole the little ranchers blind, and Mulligan talked more about combining to beat them off, it was duck soup for him to get what he wanted. Yes, for a hulk of a man, Mulligan was slick. Red had said so many a time, and Tom Mulligan had marked him down for it, tried to chivvy him around, had some of his cattle stolen.

But Red had few steers. He was a horse dealer, and his cayuses turned over so fast it was hard for Mulligan to get a good whack at them. Working secretly, not daring to bring in outsiders, just using such pretended honest riders as Slim, Salty, Levi, Dev and the other cowboys who worked for Mulligan's Crown Ranchero, it all had to be quick night work, and Red had learned to guard his stock well with his rifle and a hired hand or two when he needed them.

He had been able to hold out, all right, and for Della Lace he could do more, he thought grimly. He worked the muscles of his shoulders and went out to catch up Gringo, the big buckskin he had acquired in Mexico, the best trained work horse in the country. Gringo played hard to get for a moment or two, then seemed to giggle as he acquiesced in the operation of saddling and bridling him.

Red went back and locked up his house. He donned his Sunday cream-cooled sombrero and adjusted small rowels to the boots. He hesitated, went inside again and opened a drawer in his desk. There was a small, ugly,

snout-nosed revolver in the drawer. He touched it, then shook his head and left it there, relocked the door and mounted Gringo, who played bucking horse for a moment or two, then set sail for the main road at top speed, always playing the fool.

The road was broad and well traveled, for all the county business was between Far Hills, the county seat, and Jollop, the wide open cowboy town. It was a pretty good arrangement. Men like Daniel Starrett and Jobe Craven were happier running their banks and mills and large stores in Far Hills. The work hands were more comfortable where there were not so many women folk, and the Jollop bars ran all night when there was business to warrant it.

Della Lace lived on the edge of Jollop, in the small ranch house her brother had bought five years ago, and which now belonged partly to Mulligan. When Mulligan got ready, he would run out Cull Lace as he would any of the others—except perhaps Natty Blue, who was his confidant and best friend.

Well, it would be Autumn in a few months and if he could hold onto what he had and bring in just a normal sum of money, he and Della could start.

He rode into town and Starrett waved to him from in front of the bank. Red got down and Jobe Craven joined Starrett. The banker said excitedly, "Mulligan's in town. Blue is with him. They're drinking and talking. Mulligan's in the Wild Horse."

"You gentlemen are too excited," said Red. "Calm down. It's me he wants, not you."

Starrett said, "Red, you're a good man. If you were in Mulligan's position, this county would be better off. But is it wise to fight him?"

Red looked at the two men. They were not old—not more than forty, either of them. They wore city clothes, though, and only their faces were sun-touched. Their hands were soft, and their middles were getting soft, too. They ran the finances of Jaguar County, the stores, the bank, the mills.

Red said, "The trouble is, when a man gits something in this here country, he is either too busy holdin' it, or gits too old to enjoy it. Or to hang onto the very things in life he worked for. You're scairt of Mulligan. You're scairt he is going to take you over next, like he took over the ranchers. But do you back me, who won't truckle under to him nor sell out neither? No, you're scairt to do that, too."

Starrett said, flushing, "I'll back you with money any time you need it."

Craven added hastily, "You need shingles and paint. I'll give 'em to you, Red, on long credit. But Mulligan's goin' to raise hell to-night if you don't sell out to him. He only wants a half interest. Your spread ain't big—"

Red nodded without anger. "Sure. That's it. You figger it'll only be a small thing if I sell. And if I don't an' he gets riled, he might turn on you next and start tearin' you apart. And you ain't got the guts to fight him. You think you'll git the guts if I give you time. You think you can buy some time with my spread, my life. Gentlemen, I salute your nerve."

Starrett said, "You can't win. If you shoot him, it will be murder. He left his gun in my bank. He's unarmed."

"Is Natty Blue unarmed?" Red asked. He was watching up and down the street. He saw Pigeon, the breed, slip into the Wild Horse. He decided to leave Gringo at the bank, and got down, tying the horse with a slip-knot to the rack.

Starrett said, "Blue is not in this. Red, won't you reconside? It's for the community. It's for all of us."

"Yeah," said Jobe, squinting helplessly. "He's liable t' do a thousand dollars wuth of damage t'night. He's a rough man."

Red said, "You're a great pair of codgers, all right. See you in church tomorrow." He hitched at his cartridge belt and started to walk down Main Street—straight for the Wild Horse Bar.

SHERIFF HACK LEE was a devious man. When politicking time was on, he was a whirlwind, going up and down the country, making sure he saw everyone, man, woman and child, talking in his slow, steady manner, agreeing with every expressed opinion, patting shoulders here and hands there, until everyone was certain that the sheriff understood him and was on his side.

Between elections, Hack Lee was more circumspect, less amiable, and never one to fraternize. His only relaxation seemed to be the poker games at the Wild Horse at Far Hills and the Bucket of Blood in Jollop, games that were mostly for small stakes and went on interminably through the years.

Thus, few men disliked the sheriff, and even Tom Mulligan could find no fault with him. He was a fair man, all agreed. He attended the affairs of the county with strict justice and prompt action. Jaguar County thought itself fortunate to have such a lawman, in more ways than one.

Still, in Far Hills there was an element which was not quite certain as to Hack Lee's virtues. Daniel Starrett remembered, for instance, that Lee had never brought in the raiders who had preyed upon the small ranch owners who had been better customers of Far Hills enterprises than was Tom Mulligan, who bought wholesale. Jobe Craven had been robbed twice and neither time had the law of Jaguar County come through with the crim-

inal, although a plain trail out toward Jollop had been left by the second thief.

Thus the droop-mustached man with the straw-colored hair and pale blue eyes was accounted neither saint nor sinner, but something in between. It was possible that he was aware of this and did not regret it; no man ever knew just what did go on under his floppy-brimmed old sombrero. Hack Lee rode into town long after Red Chandor on that fateful Saturday night and at once noted Gringo at the rack before the bank.

He got down from his own horse, stiffly, for he had been riding hard most of the day, and pulled his saddle bags loose. He took out a revolver and spun the cylinders, making sure it was ready. He slid it into the waistband of his trousers, buttoned his loose coat and walked, stiff-legged and weary, toward the Wild Horse.

A man came from an alley and whispered, "They begin."

"Sartain," said the sheriff without emotion. "You check around on what I told yuh?"

"Sartain. It's like you say." The man was a gray shape in the darkness. The lights in the Wild Horse splashed out onto Main Street. There were loud noises, but Hack Lee did not seem perturbed.

The sheriff said, "I knew Red wouldn't pull no gun on him. He's ornery, but he ain't no murderer—yet. If Mulligan took his place, broke him so he couldn't marry the gal, then he'd kill. But not when things is like they are."

The shadow said, "I dunno those things. I on'y do what you say."

"Good," nodded Hack Lee. "That's the kinda man I need. Go ahead and lay up around Jaguar Leap. I'll be out there next week. You got what grub you need and everything?"

"Sartain," said the man in the shadows. He melted away and was gone without sound. The sheriff walked on down the street. Outside the Wild Horse he paused, listening to the harsh voices within. He leaned, high-shouldered, hip-shot, against the post on the porch of the hotel. The racket was coming from the barn of course, the usually quiet bar where Starrett and Craven and their friends drank and played conservative, medium-high poker.

Tom Mulligan was at one end of the bar. Natty Blue was with him. Tom Mulligan was as high as a man can comfortably grow, and Natty Blue always looked stunted beside him, although Blue was medium height. Mulligan's rock-like face was square and ugly, his mouth almost lipless, a straight slash across his face. His jaw was square, with only a slight cleft to mark it from a primordial chin. His shoulders were door-wide, his legs like oaks. He had fists as large as picnic hams

and blond hair bristled on his body, pig-like.

Natty Blue was soft and almost effeminate. His hands were slim and white and crawling always, like white mice. His face was rodent-like, too, and his eyes, pinkish, never rested. He said in his precise voice, "He is armed, Tom, and you are not. He is provoking a fight on purpose to murder you."

At the poker table in the corner, Starrett gasped audibly and Mulligan turned to stare at the banker. Nobody spoke and the bartender, pallid, was ready to duck from behind the spigots. Mulligan said, "I'll give you another chance, Red. Either I'll buy you, or you buy me! Haw, haw, haw!"

Red stood squared to the bar, legs spread a little. He was alone at his end, and at the other end were only Mulligan and Blue. Everyone else had deserted the moment the fireworks opened with Mulligan's flat challenge to him to sell out and leave the country.

Pigeon, however, was in the crowd, the cross-eyed breed with the long knife. Blue wore weapons under his clothing, an arsenal of them, all loaded and handy. Slim and Salty were there, of the Crown crew. Without seeming to, Mulligan was backed by a crew armed to the teeth.

Like the spade left with its edge in his soil, Red Chandor stood free and alone. He drank his whiskey with one easy throw of his hand. There was silence in the bar. Thirty men were crowded back against the walls, but none spoke.

Red said, "How much you want for your interests, Tom?"

"Haw!" Mulligan's humor was not even skin deep. "One hundred thousand dollars, cash on the barrel head. That's what I think of Jaguar County."

Red said mildly, "Gold? Or will you take greenbacks?"

Someone snickered nervously and Mulligan snapped, "Don't start pullin' wool over my eyes, Red Chandor. You been talkin' big. Now put up, or sell out. You're holdin' back the wheels of progress in Jaguar County."

Red said, "You keep talkin' like you was runnin' for office. You gonna buck Hack Lee next election, Tom?"

Again the snicker sounded. Mulligan's eyes rolled angrily, searching for the offender and his men moved uneasily in the crowd. Mulligan said, "I'm talkin' turkey to you, Red. You sell out to me, or git out."

"Now, that's the first time you've come into the open. Sell out or git out, huh?" Red balanced himself on his low-heeled walking boots. "How would you like to go to hell, Tom Mulligan?"

He poured another drink, sipped half of it, not even glancing at the big man. One of Mulligan's huge paws went out, pushing Natty

Blue gently aside. He took two giant strides which put him opposite Red, only a couple of yards separating them.

Red said mildly, "I see you ain't wearin' a gun, Tom. Make Natty put his out where they can be seen—and taken up."

Mulligan said, "You gonna sell out?"

It was an idle question. He was giving his men time to get set, Red knew. The time had come and there was only one or two things to do. There was never any question which course Red would take, only of his methods.

He stood at the bar, moving his hands carefully. He said, "All right—there's enough people here, I reckon, to keep Blue quiet. He works better in the dark."

The white-skinned man snarled, but Mulligan motioned impatiently for silence. "You're dealin' with me, Red. That'll be enough. When you get through dealin' with me, you won't be in shape to tackle Natty."

"Reckon you're right," said Red, shrugging. He had the belt unbuckled. He rolled it and placed it on the bar with great care. He patted himself openly, showing that he had no other weapons. He said, "You're a big, rough, tough man, Tom. You've almost whipped Jaguar County. But you—ain't—whipped me—yet!" He picked up the whiskey glass and threw it into the glaring eyes of the bigger man.

Chapter II

RACE FOR THE BORDER

HE HAD no chance of avoiding a beating, and he had little chance of doing damage of his own unless he acted with despatch. He had red hair, but he was cool in action, and his left fist was followed by his right as he swung on the startled Mulligan. Before the big rancher could open his eyes, Red was clouting him across the floor, pinning him to a suddenly deserted wall.

Natty Blue was screaming, "Dirty! He threw whiskey in Tom's eyes!"

No one paid the slightest attention. The Crown riders were caught in the milling, wildly interested mob. Hopes burgeoned in certain breasts as Red beat his fists against the huge frame. This early work might count in the balance.

Tom Mulligan got his eyesight back as a looping right knocked him to the floor. He threw up his elbow to protect his face, but Red could not go in with the short spurs and finish it.

Mulligan said hoarsely, "Okay. You had yer chance. You tried it and it didn't work. I'm comin' at yuh now, Red. Say yer prayers."

Mulligan's face was bleeding. One lip was cut, one eye partly shut. He arose like a beast

from the slimy jungle, his great arms bowed. He walked forward slowly, stumping on his thick legs. His eyes were stony. He reached out one arm to prop Red in its mighty grasp while he struck with the other.

Red ducked. Then, instead of running away, he bent and rammed forward. His fists went into Mulligan's middle, beating, slashing, tearing. His head was on the corded chest of the giant, and his labor-strengthened back muscles went into every blow.

He felt Mulligan give even as the first shortened, club-like blow struck him alongside the head. He went back and almost down. Mulligan took another step and kicked.

Red barely flung himself aside in time to avoid that kick which would have put him where further kicking would finish him, blind him, perhaps kill him. He reached out blindly and seized Mulligan's boot.

He got a good grip, by luck, below the spur. He braced himself and heaved. Big as Mulligan was, the leverage was against him. He seemed to sunfish like a bucking horse. He crashed to the floor with force enough to shake the hotel on its foundations.

There was a sharp exhalation from the audience. Strangely, there had been no cheers for either man. Mulligan's men were preserving a pseudo anonymity, as though they were not present to see the end go their way, and townsfolk feared Crown and its owner. Natty Blue yelled, "Foul again! He's a dirty fighter!"

Again Red did not use the boots. Drawing big gulps of air into his lungs he backed away, seeking some of the strength he knew he would need. He saw Mulligan crawl erect, pulling himself up with a hand grip on the bar, saw the big man coming again, bleeding, bruised, inexorable. Mulligan said, "Two chances. You ain't bright, Red. If I get you down, yer a dead duck, I'm warnin' yuh."

Red leaped. He was not expected to attack, therefore he did so. He led with a stiff left in front of his charging shoulder. He prodded it like a battering ram into Mulligan's face. The giant actually reeled, then chopped a short swinging blow, shrewdly aimed, at Red's body.

The blow landed. It seemed to tear out Red's ribs and scatter them about the floor. The power in the big man's fists was phenomenal. In a hundred encounters, no one had ever hit Red close to that hard. He tried to get sideways and make a smaller target.

A winging punch knocked him over the top of the bar. The big paws reached for him. He felt himself lifted high, felt giddiness engulfing him.

He was agile, and he managed to squirm. Mulligan was dashing him to the floor, seeking to knock the breath from him. He turned in mid-air and landed half on his feet, spring-

ing away from the giant form of Mulligan.

They were both bleeding now. Red, against the wall, saw the crouching, hulking form coming at him. He set his shoulders and kicked at Mulligan's kneecap. He got home and the big man staggered, howling at the pain.

Again Red came to the attack, doggedly, like a stubborn bull beating his brains out against a sturdy barn wall. His fists went at Mulligan's belly, with everything he ever had or hoped to have riding in the array of punches. He got into the soft flesh, which lay beneath the corrugated muscles, and again and again he punched.

He swarmed back and Mulligan's mouth was open. Mulligan's fist knocked Red in a carom off the bar, but Red spread his legs and managed to stay on his feet. Mulligan was standing like an oak in a storm, his mouth green at the edges.

Red leaped and curled a right to the midsection and a pronging left straight to the chin. Mulligan winced. Red measured him, propping back his head with a jabbing left. Mulligan's huge hands hung helpless.

Red hit him with all he had. It was a punch whip-like and crackling. It made a loud snapping sound when it landed.

Mulligan went full length. He lay there while the dust rose and settled about him. His toes twitched once, then there was no further motion in him.

Red's face was like a sore boil and inwardly he quaked. But he managed to walk to the bar. The bottle of whiskey stood firm, and he picked it up and poured a drink. His hand shook, all right, but he got it up and drained the glass.

Natty Blue yelled hysterically, "All right, boys. He fouled Tom. Let him have it!"

Blue had a derringer from up his sleeve in his right hand and in his left a short-barreled gun from his armpit holster. He also carried a Bowie in his boot and another gun inside his waistband, it was said. Red leaned against the wall and swept a glance around the bar.

Slim and Safty were hesitating. They were in a strict minority and their principal had lost. Natty Blue was not a fighter in the real sense of the word and did not understand the nuances of such a situation. The two Crown riders had come forward and bent over Mulligan. They sort of stuck out like sore thumbs, they felt, and their hands did not go to their belts.

Natty Blue said, "I'll kill him myself."

From the doorway, Hack Lee drawled, "I wouldn't, Blue. It looked like a fair fight to me. You shoot Red, it'll be a hangin' fer you."

Someone in the crowd said, "Thet's fer sure, Sheriff. You tell 'im!"

It was enough. Public opinion crystallized. Hack Lee shrugged and turned to leave the bar. Men swarmed around Red Chandor, patting his back, buying him drinks. But he escaped from them and, aching in every bone, was going out the door when Daniel Starrett caught his arm. The banker said, "You beat him. Now he'll kill you. He never meant to be beaten in a fair fight. Watch out, Red. I admire your courage—but he'll be after you now."

Red said, "I know. 'Scuse me, Starrett, I got a date with my gal." He mounted the horse in front of the bank and rode out of town.

IT WAS midnight when he quartered in at Cull Lace's buildings, approaching from the rear. He dismounted and let Gringo's reins trail while he walked in the shadows, wanting no trouble with Cull now, weak from the blows Mulligan had landed, the inside of his mouth torn against his teeth, blood salty on his palate. He picked up some loose pebbles and threw them against the second-story window where Della slept.

He heard an answer and leaned against the house at the corner nearest the barn. His mind was racing along. He had known what to do when he left Far Hills. Starrett's warning had been unnecessary. So soon as Mulligan recovered he would be issuing orders to get DD Ranch, to crush Red Chandor.

No one would interfere. It would be done at night, under the guise of outlawry from the hills. They would shoot his cattle, burn his outbuildings. If he did not protect himself they would do it boldly; if he was very clever and very quick they might be forced to more subtle methods. But the end would be the same—the might of Crown and its satellite ranches against little DD.

There were footsteps and he called in low accents, "Della?"

A club came at his head. He never knew why he ducked, receiving only a glancing blow. He saw the man behind the club and stepped back. He was almost too weary to fight. He reached into the depths of his wish to survive to bring forth a swinging punch. He caught the man before he could recover balance and knocked him sideways. He jumped, seizing the club, a wagon wheel spoke of hickory which would have split his skull had it landed. He threw the club away and beat the man briefly, with his sore fists, until he went spinning along and fell in the dust.

A lamp was lit indoors and the orange beam came through and fell across the face of the man in the dirt. He was bloodied and his mouth was slack and weak. He said thickly, "Damn you, Chandor, keep away from my sister. Mulligan will take care of you."

Red ignored the drunken weakling who had sold half of Della's ranch to Tom Mulligan. He went to the window and the girl wore a shawl over a full length nightgown. He whispered, "I'm takin' my cattle out. I'll make the border before they can get together and hit me, and my friend Pedro Gonzales will rent me a pasture. I'll sell 'em in Mexico, if I have to, but I can't leave them for Mulligan to shoot or poison."

She said, "You're hurt! Did Cull—"

"He missed me," said Red without bitterness. "He's half drunk again. It was Tom beat me."

She said, "Oh, Red, I warned you."

"Well," he told her, drawling a little, "he didn't win. That's why I got to git. I wanted you to know I'd be back. He'll maybe think I'm runnin' away."

She looked back him to where her brother struggled to rise in a semi-stupor, falling back spotted with the dirt and the liquor, drooling, a gross, sodden young man, a caricature of his handsome sister. She said, "Nobody will think you are running away, Red. You underestimate your reputation in Jaguar County. They will know exactly what you are doing. That you are getting ready to return and fight, that you are merely lightening your burdens so that you can fight the harder. Did you need to beat Cullenbine so badly?"

Red said, "He nearly killed me with a hickory stick and ordered me to stay away from you."

"Tom stopped by on his way to Far Hills and left a bottle," she said steadily. "It was his idea that you be ordered off."

"He's a great idea man," Red said, "but I'll have to see him about it later. I'm ridin' south, now."

She said, "Alone? You're running those steers alone?"

"I couldn't hire anyone without tippin' my hand," he explained. "And anyway, right now there ain't anyone in Jaguar County'd dare work for me!" He leaned through the open window and said abruptly, "One kiss. I got to go."

She kissed him, and he tore himself away. He saw Cullenbine Lace staggering toward the barn and wondered if the drunk had a shotgun out there. He mounted swiftly and took himself out of the way of his girl's brother. He wondered what he would do, finally, about that problem. Cull was no good, through and through, a wastrel, lazy, stupid. It was amazing that Della could own such a brother.

Red stopped off first at the ranch house to get some food and change his clothes. Then he rode on.

He found the herd quietly grazing and started them, and they went along tractably enough. They were well fed and there was

plenty of water on the route. He did not expect any trouble from the steers.

He took his rifle from the boot and shoved it where it was handiest. The sort of trouble he did expect could be handled only by rifle and revolver fire. He thought he heard a rider thunder past on the road below. He waited, praying the cattle would not make enough noise to be heard. In quick silence lay his only hope of getting a start toward Mexico.

THE rider paused at the entrance to the Lace ranch. He swung into the yard as he saw the staggering figure of the drunk in the backyard. The lamp downstairs had been extinguished and Della's voice said peremptorily, "Come in here at once, Cull. It's a mercy Red didn't beat you to death!"

There was no answer from the drunken man in the yard. He had a pitchfork in his hands and seemed to be looking for something. The rider went in softly, got close. He drew a long-barrelled revolver and said, "Cull, look here."

The drunk swung, staring. The barrel fell, once, twice, even as the man plunged earthward. The steel bit sharply into bone. Cullenbine Lace never moved as he lay on the ground. The rider swung his horse over soft ground, dismounted, crouched, pulling a poncho from his saddle.

Della said from within the house, "You can lie out there in your drunken stupor, then. I'm ashamed, degraded. . . ." The lamp reappeared in an upstairs window and the girl's face peered out. The rider dragged his poncho over the tracks his horse had made, retreating rapidly beyond the light thrown by the lamp.

Cullenbine Lace never moved again. . . .

The rider disappeared into the night.

* * *

Southward, Red Chandor, sleepless, drove the cattle. They went over Jaguar Leap and down the valley. They watered and kept going, neither willing nor reluctant so long as they had water. Red rode like three men, chivvying his herd to safety.

It was night of the second day when he heard noises which could only mean pursuit. He was throwing the bunch across a road, hitting the short cut to the Rio. He sent the gaunt Gringo to a hill and sat there, looking down.

It was Dev and Levi, two of the Crown riders, and they were hot on his trail. They crossed the road and showed caution, getting under a tree and confabbing together there. Dev, who was the tracker, got down and examined the bent blades of grass. He could tell then that the herd was closed ahead. He gesticulated, and remounted his cayuse. The two swung and rode the back trail at top speed.

Reluctantly, Red forbore following. He went back to the herd and sent them through

the ford of the Serpent River. He was close enough to the border to begin to look for friends. He had sent a telegram from the station at Porte, and if Pedro had received it, all would be well across the Rio.

He got the herd moving. He had an old longhorn leader who had a lot of savvy and he kicked it into the arroyo which would lead to an open plain. Beyond the plain was the river, the border and safety. But it was necessary to get the cattle out on the plain and running. If he could manage that without being dry-gulched, he thought grimly, he would take his chances.

The leader switched his tail, hesitated. Red swung Gringo in close and whicked the longhorn critter with his quirt. The big steer tossed his head, but moved smartly into the arroyo. The others poured after him. Red sat on Gringo, facing rearward, waiting with bated breath for an enemy to show himself.

The last of the critters went in. Red dropped to earth, rifle in his hands. He clapped Gringo softly on the flank and said, "Go on, hoss. Git after 'em. Run 'em clear to the Rio fer me, Gringo!"

The buckskin whinnied, cheerfully wheeled and went on into the arroyo behind the trailing little band of dogies. The horse knew its work better than a good many two-legged cowhands, Red thought. He stumbled a bit, and realized how weary he was. But he gained a thicket on the back trail and hunkered down, gouging at his bloodshot eyes to keep them open.

It was Pigeon who came first, warily studying the trail. Dev was with him, both dismounted, leading their mounts. Behind them Levi, Salty and Slim came laden with arms. Pigeon was a lowering, dirty breed with all the bad habits of his Indian forebears and none of their nobility. He paused and grunted, "One hour, mebbe two. We go now."

He reached to gather his reins. Red sighted along the rifle barrel, closing his tired eyes, then opening them wide. He touched the trigger.

Pigeon's horse gave a great leap and dropped dead, a bullet through its skull. Pigeon froze where he stood. Red called from his thicket, "Howdy boys. You want to rush us? I got me four men cached around here. I ain't much for murderin', but what the hell, you're askin' for it."

They were right in the open, they had never expected him on the back trail. He had been alone, according to the tracks, and in a hurry. Their mouths hung open. Pigeon screamed, "No got nobody! The devil!" He grabbed up his rifle and swung around.

Red shot the breed without compunction. Then he wheeled and scuttled like a rabbit through the brush to a position ten yards away.

He lifted his rifle from that spot and sent a shot among the others, aiming a little high.

Dev, a lowering big man, held his hands behind his neck and said sourly, "We believe yuh, Red. Yuh gonna kill us in cold blood?"

Red had managed to get back to his original spot. He said, "I'm goin' to hold yuh right here until my men get the herd over the river. Your boss forgot about my friends down yonder, I reckon. There are enough of 'em to take care of any sorry lil old gang like you-all. Now hunker down and if yuh feel like takin' a shot at me or my men, just go ahead. We'll shoot back—and we're under cover. Jest set awhile, boys, and smoke if you like. Yuh can even play cards, if yuh thought to bring a deck. But don't take a step forward!"

Dev said, "Kin we kiver Pigeon with a tarpaulin? He'll be drawin' blow flies in a lil while."

"Hell, yuh can bury him," said Red carelessly. "I don't care."

They were fairly caught and they did not make a bad move. The hours passed. It was dusk when Dev raised his arms and said, "Well, may as well go on down and make sure he got 'em over."

Slim said, "Whatta yuh mean, Dev? I dowanna get shot by no Mex in them bushes."

Dev said, "There ain't been nobody in them bushes fer hours."

Slim arose and stared. He said, "Well, then what we doin' here?"

"Makin' sure," said the older man calmly. "There mought have been someone. It only needed one man, didn't it? He had cover, we had none. He laid his trap good and we rode into it. And it's known Red's got friends over in Mexico."

Slim said, "We coulda tried it agin one man. Hell, Dev—"

"How much wages you git?" Dev asked curiously. "More'n me? More'n enough to go tearin' into an ambush?"

Levi guffawed. He said, "Dev's got the hull thing right, Slim. Let's go down an' make sure the devil got 'em over. He's tough and he's smart, this one. Tom'll play hell beatin' him by straight methods."

"You ain't jest a talkin'," said Dev. They moved cautiously, and there was no challenge from the bushes. They got on their horses and rode into the gathering twilight, coming into the arroyo. Beyond stretched the plain and the river was closer than they had thought. Shrugging, they turned and headed back for Jaguar County to report to their boss. . . .

Over the river, Pedro Gonzalez was trying to send vaqueros back with Red Chandor. He was voluble in Spanish, protesting that Red could not fight the entire Jaguar country.

"I know," said Red patiently. "But you can't afford to get in it. Just you put my mon-

ey for the beef in the bank at El Paso and I'll be around later."

"You will be keel, amigo," said Gonzalez sadly. "Thees Mulligan, I know heem." He lapsed into Spanish again, cursing. "He is keeler, destroyer. . . ."

Red said, "You sure do know him, Pedro. Well, I'll be seein' you. I'm thinking about taking my honeymoon in Mexico. Have a room ready for me." He waved and rode Gringo away from the huge hacienda. He and the horse were both rested and the bruises of battle had disappeared from him. He felt pretty good again. He wondered how Mulligan felt.

He was, he found, a good hater. He had worked hard, over the years, and Mulligan's threat to the fruits of his labor was something which struck deep. What a man has earned, he found, he will defend with his last drop of blood. He rode past the place where he had killed Pigeon without curiosity enough to look for a grave. He put Gringo to the trail and jaunted northward, his blood quickening with every mile.

THEY HELD the inquest in town. Natty Blue said in his high, strange voice, "There is no doubt. Della admits Chandor was there, that he had a fight with Cullenbine Lace. It was cold-blooded murder."

The coroner, Malachi Brown, said, "Nobody ast yuh for your opinion, Blue."

"I was on the road. I saw Chandor ride away, very swiftly," said Blue. "I stopped to pay my respects to my friend, Cull Lace. He was dead, his skull fractured."

Hack Lee caressed his drooping mustache. He said, "Where was Tom Mulligan right then?"

"I have no idea," said Blue. "He had ridden ahead."

Brown scowled. He said, "Cull mighta fallen agin somethin'. He was drunk. His own sister says he was drunk."

Blue arose, preparatory to leaving the improvised witness stand in the bar of the Wild Horse. He said spitefully, "Della is known to be romancing with Red Chandor. After all—"

Hack Lee roared with amazing wrath, "Suh, are you impugnin' the word or the character of a lady in this heah co't?"

Blue said, "Er—of course not, Sheriff." He looked startled, staring at Lee as though he had expected no opposition from this source.

"Then git outa here," said Lee. He watched the pale man stalk from the bar. He turned to Brown and said impatiently, "Git it over with. I got ridin' to do."

The coroner said doubtfully, "Waal, Red done rode south with his cattle, we all know that. Now, if he was to never come back, we could take it he kilt Cull—mebbe not intendin'

to, on account of Red could whip Cull any day in the week and twicet on Sunday, we all know thet. But on the other hand, mebbe Cull said somethin' 'bout Della Lace an' Red lost his temper. Red done had a bad time in town thet night. Now, Della Lace sez Red beat Cull, then left, and thet it was two hours later Natty Blue woke her with the news Cull was layin' dead near the barn. So Red would had to go away, like Della sez, she bein' a lady and not a liar, and then come back and skulled Cull. If you jurors think it was thetaway, you'll have to vote he done it, perhaps."

Hack Lee turned his pale eyes away to conceal amusement. The jurors went to the end of the bar and debated. Malachi Brown, who was the local undertaker and carpenter as well as coroner, came close and whispered, "What side you on, anyway, Hack?"

"On the side of the law," said the sheriff stonily. "Like I swore when I was elected."

Brown said spiritedly, "Then why aincha out stoppin' Mulligan from burnin' Red outa house an' barn, which everyone knows he will do?"

"'Cause Mulligan ain't done it yet and I ain't hired to guard the property of private land owners," said Lee flatly. "There's your jury with the verdict. You shore confused 'em."

Jobe Craven was foreman. He said stiffly, "We, the jury, find the deceased met his death by violence at the hands of—person or persons unknown."

Malachi heaved a sigh of relief. He said, "Whew! I was scairt someone was gonna say Red Chandor done it and I know he never did. He ain't no murderer."

Hack Lee was heading for the door. He said over his shoulder, "Thet's something everybody is, in his heart, one time or another in his life." He banged out the door and was gone aboard his tireless cayuse, heading west.

He rode straight to the Lace Ranch. He passed the side road leading to Chandor's DD spread, but saw no sign that Red had returned. He came into the Lace place and dismounted. Della was in town and the hired help was not in sight.

He walked carefully around the yard. He had been over the ground early on the day the body was removed, but bootprints had been all over everything. And he had never found the track of a horse leading to or from the spot where Cull lay.

Yet he had examined the wound with utmost care, for he was a man who took pains about small things. He had pulled his own gun and laid the muzzle against the wound in Cull's head. Several attempts had convinced him of one thing. Cull Lace had been struck by someone sitting a horse. The angle of the wound proved it.

Yet no horse had left prints in the backyard. There had been no rain, and he had looked carefully.

He had easily picked up Gringo's hoof-marks, in the front of the house. He was sure enough that Gringo had come in and gone out without traversing the yard alongside or beyond the house. This did not finally prove anything, he supposed, but it gave him something to chew upon.

He rode west, but not all the way to Crown. He shoved into a thicket and cocked a leg over the pommel of his hull, smoking, drooping, waiting.

After a while a man rode along the trail, paused and whistled a whip-poor-will call. He was a nondescript man, of medium height and appearance. He wore dusty clothing and his hammerhead cayuse had seen rough riding that day.

Hack Lee rode out of the thicket and said, "Howdy, Will. You find him?"

"Sartain," said Will. "He's comin' up."

"Got acrost the Rio all right?"

"Sartain. Lost nary a beef. Kilt Pigeon, too."

Hack Lee said, "Yuh don't say? Pigeon, huh?"

"Shot him with a rifle."

Hack Lee shook his head. "Natty Blue raised a ruckus at th' inquest. When ye git rested, ye can sorta look after thet one."

The man called Will said, "Sartain." He clucked to his weary pony and rode east, toward Far Hills.

"Best damn deputy a man ever had," Hack Lee muttered to himself. "Now I wonder what Mulligan is up t'?"

He turned his horse's head toward Crown.

DOWN SOUTH, Red was coming up the trail without haste, making plans. He was fully aware that Mulligan would tie into him, but there was little the owner of Crown would do other than burn him out. It would be bad policy to do that, for the people of Jaguar County, being vulnerable to burnings themselves, would frown upon such an act, knowing full well the perpetrator.

Yet what else could Crown do to him? His small string of horses would not attract them. His cattle were safe. He had not yet rounded up his string of wild ones for the horse market. Perhaps Mulligan would do nothing until Red had broken his catch for this year.

But he knew better than that. Tom Mulligan was not one to smart silently under the beating he had taken. He would be raging with humiliation and desire for revenge. Red rode alone warily, keeping to the by-paths he knew so well. He came into the home county and the hills were pleasantly cool around him and summertime was lush and rich in promise of

the Autumn to come, with harvests for all and fine fodder for live stock.

He came to the road, paused. Looking up and down he saw no sign of life. He spurred the buckskin gently and went across the road and along the border of trees which skirted the trail to Lace Ranch.

He was suddenly afire with eagerness to see Della. He entered a small clearing, then was aware that this space was newly cleared, that there had been a copse of heavy growth here a week ago. Gringo stopped dead. Red stared down at a newly dug mound of earth.

There was a wooden cross at its head. Red's heart came up and lodged in his throat and stuck there, and he kicked Gringo so sharply that the faithful animal bolted through the trees. They rounded the corner of the hedge and went into the yard and the buckskin slid on its haunches as Red dropped to earth running, and called, "DeHa! Darling! Della!"

When she came to the door and stood staring at him, he thought he would burst with joy. He bounded up the steps and reached for her.

She backed away, into the house. She said wanly, "Red—you're back."

He said, "What happened? What's the matter?"

"It's Cull," she said. "He was killed—the night you were here, the night you left."

He said, "Killed? How?"

"His skull was fractured," she said steadily. "You beat him, Red. Could you have killed him?"

Red gripped the back of a chair, thinking hard. He rehearsed every move, remembered Cull retreating to the barn. He muttered, "He went into the barn. Or at least toward it. I thought he was going for a gun. I don't know if he even made the barn, but he was walkin' when I took off from here."

She heaved a deep sigh. She said, "Natty Blue has been telling stories. Some people in town think you and Cull quarrelled over me, and that you killed him. I let it out that you had fought with him. I didn't mean to tell anything on you, Red. It slipped out, I was so distraught."

He said, "You were in trouble and I was away. I'm sorry, Della."

She said, "People are saying that Cull stood between us. I'd—I'd like to find out who did kill him before we—get married, Red."

There was this thing between them, then. He found no blame for her. He said woodenly, "Yes, Della. I'll do what I can."

She said, "Hack Lee has been around, snooping. I don't quite know what to make of him. He seems on all sides at once."

Red said, "He's a hard man to shave."

"There's Will Blake, from Jollop, always riding the countryside," she said. "A strange,

quiet little man, always saying 'Sartain' and not much else."

"I know him. Also a hard rock," said Red. "If Hack Lee has sold out to Mulligan—"

She said, "They could frame you, Red. They'd hang you."

"Yes," he said. "I'll see what I can do, Della." He walked out of the house and across the porch. She followed only to the doorway and stood, her hand against the frame, watching him.

She said, "I'm going to town and stay at the hotel for awhile. We're shipping the cattle—Mulligan is taking over, of course. He's offered me five thousand for the remaining half of the ranch. I suppose I'll take it."

Red said, "Whatever you say, Della." Lace bordered Crown and was miles from DD's boundaries. He got on the horse and said, "I'll see you in town, then." It was all dead and static and the cloud came in and gathered about his head, black and foreboding.

He rode for the home ranch, realizing now how much of it had been tied up in Della Lace. Working alone, laboring over the house, making plans for paint and uncracked glass and new furniture would be bootless for a man alone.

The gulf between them might narrow, but he felt helpless against the odds. On top of Mulligan's enmity now hung the suspicion of murder—as though he would stoop to murder Cull Lace. If he had killed Lace, he would have called in the sheriff at once and explained the circumstances. Anyone should know that about Red Chandor.

He began to grow angry, thinking that they should suspect him of a foul killing and flight southward. He wondered what Hack Lee thought about it. He rode into his own yard seething with anger.

He saw nothing untoward about the place. His horses had been grazing in the house pasture. Nothing seemed disturbed. He unsaddled Gringo and sent him to join the rest of the cavy and went into the house, opening doors and windows to air the place.

The moment he sat down at his desk he knew something was wrong. He couldn't quite place it, but something was disarranged. He got up and walked around the small room at the left of the T-shaped ranch house.

He paused, staring at the spare cartridge belt upon the wall. He always hung it semi-rolled over the wooden pegs. The gun butt slanted at the wrong angle. He was a neat man of careful habits and he had not hung that gun that way.

He stepped across the room just as a voice said, "All right. Hold it, Chandor."

He froze, his hands spread. The voice was cold, but underneath it was hot with hate. He said, "What are you doin' here?"

Mulligan stepped through the door. He said, "Folleyed yuh in, Red. Me and Natty and some of the boys. Thought we'd take a look at somethin'."

Natty Blue went past Tom, his pallid face twisted into a sneer. He reached for the holstered gun in the belt. He yanked it down and said, "There you are. Knew it. There's hair on it, and blood, yet. You can see it is Cull Lace's hair by the color."

The gun muzzle was stained, all right. Red stared at it and said dully, "What damned fool would leave it that way? This is a frame."

"Natty knowed you did it," said Mulligan curtly. "That jury in Far Hills was rigged. Della herself said you'd beat him. You're quite a fighter with yer fists, ain't you, Red? A reg'lar professional. But you overdid it this time, wallop'in' Cull, then beatin' out his brains."

Red said, "You know I didn't bring no gun back here with blood an' hair on it an' put it in the holster dirty. Nobody could be that dumb."

"You prob'ly got your guns mixed," said Mulligan triumphantly. "You took off that night. You prob'ly took the wrong gun."

Red subsided. There was nothing to be done about it. He saw the cynical face of Dev, of Slim. They knew, but they also knew he had killed Pigeon, down to the south, and held them at bay during the hot day, for which they had taken a fierce tongue lashing on their return to their boss.

Mulligan said, the eagerness almost choking him, "Get his hog-leg, Dev. We got him this time. If they don't hang him, I'll hang him. But I want this legal. I want Hack to handle it, and the judge to sentence him."

Natty Blue said, "My evidence'll do it, in a fair court. Don't you worry, Tom, we've got him." He was fawning like a yellow dog, Red thought disgustedly. "You and I, Tom, we'll show them!"

Dev lifted the gun. There was nothing for Red to do but surrender. There were four men who would have shot him with pleasure and told their own story of the tell-tale revolver afterwards.

Chapter III

GUN-LAW RULES FAR HILLS

HACK LEE said, "Yeah, they're comin' fer yuh." He stroked his mustache with a lean finger. "Natcher'ly, Mulligan an' Natty Blue are bringin' all o' Jollop down here. There's bound t' be a fight betwixt the two factions if I turn yuh a-loose."

Red Chandor sat in the sheriff's office. Della Lace was coming across from the hotel, hurrying. She wore a gingham dress and no bonnet

on her black hair. Red watched her graceful stride and said, "Like I say, Starrett and Craven and them won't fight. They're scairt of any man on a hoss with a gun. In their time they fought, but they got belongin's, now."

Hack Lee said, "A sheriff's got to git along with all kinds."

"I know," said Red reasonably. Della came into the office without slackening the drive of her headlong attack. Red said, "Now, Della, take it easy. Yuh got to look at things from all angles."

"I know they are coming in to lynch you!" she cried. "I've been to the townsfolk and they are barring their doors and getting ready to hide. They won't do a single thing to help. You've got to ride out of here."

"If he does, Mulligan'll shoot up the town. Then there'll be civil war in Jaguar County," said Hack Lee.

Della said, "What would you do, hold him and let them hang him?" Her cheeks were pink and her dark eyes blazed. She lifted one hand from the folds of the gingham dress. She said, "Yes, Sheriff, I know you would. You are a cold, hard customer. You know Red did not kill my brother, but you won't turn him loose. All right, Sheriff, look at this. Get his gun, Red."

The two men sat, stunned. In Della's hand was a short-barrelled revolver. It pointed steadily at Hack Lee.

The sheriff's hands went slowly up. He said, "Waal, if you take him by force—" He seemed resigned, but his pale eyes were curiously alive.

Red hesitated. Then he gingerly took the gun from Hack Lee's low-slung holster. He backed to the door and said, "Gringo around?"

Della said, "Out back, ready to ride."

Red said, "Okay. Hold him here." He slipped out of the jail building. Gringo was waiting, ears pricked back. Red went close to him, tied the dangling reins to the saddle horn. He whispered, "Go home, Gringo. Git!"

The horse pranced, snorted, then took off as though on wings, going cross-country by the back way. Gringo knew the way and would not stop until he had hit the home pasture, Red knew. He sighed, wondering if he had signed his death warrant with this act.

It was broad daylight, but people were busy barring their portals against the expected onslaught of Mulligan and his riders. Red stood in the shadow of the building, looking about. The jail was built of adobe bricks reenforced with heavy timbers. He glanced upward at the ridge poles, which extended a foot or two beyond the edge of the roof itself.

His face lighted. He walked to the jail, got a foot on the sill of a window and grasped the

bars. He stepped up and reached. The roof was low and he got a hand on the ridge pole. He swung under and out and his strong hands grabbed and he lifted himself onto the roof.

It was very hot, but the sun was slanting. He got to the chimney and hunkered down in its slight shade, tilting his sombrero against the western light. He lit a cigarette and waited, counting his scanty blessings and the five shells in the revolver he had taken from Hack Lee.

Red sat for an hour, thinking it out. He heard Della's voice below, and Hack Lee saying reasonably, "Yuh better lemme get another gun. I won't do nothin' to bring Red back. An' you know I wouldn't harm yuh."

Della almost sobbed, "You've let him go—and I might never see him again."

Hack Lee said, "Don't take on so, Miss Della. Things sometimes work out fer the best."

"Oh, you," she cried. "You—you politician!" She ran across the street to the hotel, the gun still in her hand. Red could just see her by craning from behind the chimney. He wished he had more ammunition.

TIME DRAGGED by. Hack Lee moved about in the jail below. Hack had no other prisoners just then. The sheriff seemed restless. Red kept his gaze on the road coming from the west.

The bank and the stores were closed and hastily boarded up. No one stirred in Far Hills. The town had gone underground. The fear of the riders from the cowboy town was something Red could almost smell, up on his roof post.

Hack Lee went out the back and stared in the direction Gringo had gone, the short out across country toward the ranches of Jaguar. Red flattened himself until the officer went inside again. He thought Lee was holding a scattergun in his hands but he could not be sure because he was afraid to look too close.

There was a thin cry, far in the distance. Red whirled to stare at a cloud of dust on the western road.

Crowns was coming, with Mulligan at its head and the satellite ranchers in the van. The lynching bee was on. Red stretched his legs, moved his arms in the shimmering heat, making sure his circulation was all right, ready for action. Five shells—he could take a quintet to hell with him. It was scant satisfaction when he thought of Della.

They came hurrahing into town, filling Main Street with the dust from their horses' hoofs, with their cowboy yips and yells. Mulligan raised a hand and they all settled down, milling about the jail, quieting their steeds.

Hack Lee's voice came up, without fear or haste. "Y'all are creatin' a hell of a disturb-

ance. Far Hills is worried t' death. You got no call t' do thet. Yuh better ride out, Tom."

"What's this I hear 'bout you turnin' Red Chander a-loose?" demanded Mulligan.

Hack Lee said, "Well, he ain't guilty. But I didn't turn him loose. Della Lace put a gun on me and got him loose."

From across the street, Della's voice rang out, "That's right, Tom Mulligan. You want to do anything about that?"

A cowboy whooped, but Mulligan roared, "Quiet! Some of you better go take a look around town for Red."

Dev drawled, "His hoss is gone. I already looked."

Mulligan howled, "Hack, you let him git away. By God, I got a notion—"

A little silence fell incongruously upon the excited street. Then Hack Lee's voice said, in a monotone, "You're the big man, Tom. What you got a notion to start? Somethin' you kin finish, I hope."

Mulligan said, "You let a criminal go a-loose. No woman could take a man away you didn't want to go."

Hack Lee said, "She's holdin' a gun right now, in case yuh start somethin'. Why don't you jump her? Or send Natty Blue—he's the kind would jump a woman."

Red tensed, on the roof. There was a rider coming from across lots, and he was leading a horse. It was Gringo and the rider came close enough to be recognized as Will Blake.

Natty Blue's high voice said, "Be careful how you talk to me, Sheriff."

Hack Lee said slowly, "Waal, there was the chestnut hoss. Miss Della rode him into town today, innocent-like. Thet brand—it's an awful blotch. There is hardly anyone would know thet it read DD fast. But I mind when Red caught thet chestnut and tamed him an' added him to his cavy. Then he strayed and someone stole him. Then Cull Lace, knowin' the hoss was stole, blotched the brand agin and kept the hoss. He also knowed Red wouldn't do nothin' to him, on account of Della." Hack Lee had a smooth tongue for politicking and his voice was well oiled for a long speech.

Natty Blue said, "That kind of stuff is plain damned nonsense. Tom—let's get that killer and string him up and ignore the sheriff."

Hack Lee drawled, "It's kinda hard to ignore a sawed-off shotgun. And there's Miss Della with a rifle. Looks like you gents better jest hold still awhile."

Mulligan said dangerously, "Not for long, Hack. You can't hold us like this, not an army of you."

Hack Lee seemed to be listening. Will Blake came in with Gringo and dismounted behind the jail, spurs jangling. Out front the cowboys were muttering, waiting for

Mulligan to give the word. This was no motley crew to be tamed by a shotgun and a rifle in a woman's hand. Red moved from behind the chimney, the sheriff's gun cocked, going forward. Downstairs Will Blake, the nondescript man, walked through the jail house from back to front.

Hack said, "Long enough, Tom. Long enough to tell about the chestnut Miss Della thought Cull bought from Red for her to ride. Cull didn't buy thet hoss, Miss Della. He stole it from Natty Blue, who had stole him from Red."

Natty Blue shrieked, "That's a dirty lie."

Hack said without emotion, "Will Blake, here, is my deputy. Sort of a secret deputy sence all this trouble began brewin'. You folks scarcely notice Will, so he makes a fine man fer this work. Willy, what about the chestnut?"

Blake's dull voice said, "Sartain. Like you say, Hack. Cull use t' laugh at Blue 'bout it. I heard 'im."

Mulligan said, "Shut up, Natty. We ain't talkin' 'bout no stale ole hoss tradin's, Sheriff. We want a murderer and we're goin' after him."

Hack Lee said, "I was jest pointin' out a motive fer murder," said Hack mildly. "Natty hates to be laughed at. Yuh can do most anything to Natty and git away with it if yuh keep your face to him alla time, but don't laugh at him. He's plumb sensitive 'bout it, ain'tcha, Natty?"

Blue said, "You're a fool. You're a politticking fool."

Hack Lee said, "But not fool enough t' think Red Chandor kilt a man with a gun barrel when he could whup him left-handed. And not fool enough t' think Red Chandor left the murder gun in his house whilst he went south. And not fool enough to fail to send Will Blake, here, to El Paso to learn whose gun this is, anyways. It's got a cracked stock, see? It was bought by mail. It was sent here, second-hand, and it was never seen to be carried by Red Chandor, who has seldom toted iron, nor by anyone else, neither. And the reason it wasn't never seen is—"

From the roof, Red shouted, "Look out, Hack!"

Natty Blue was trying for a shot from his sleeve gun. He was sitting on a horse and trying to make it without moving very much.

Red threw down and fired. Natty Blue's hat went off, his head threw back and his face stared at the roof top. He essayed once more to get in a shot, this time at Red.

MULLIGAN'S gun was out, but he did not fire. The twin muzzles of the shotgun the sheriff held fixed him, ignoring all others. Red

was whirling for the back of the roof, whistling to Gringo. The well-trained horse edged close, and Red dropped to the saddle, balancing himself, sliding into the hull, sending Gringo around the edge of the building.

They stared at him and he stared back. Natty Blue lay where he had fallen and his horse was racking down Main Street. No one else seemed disposed to move. Hack Lee held the shotgun steady and Will Blake nursed a Winchester. Across the street Della did not waver, the rifle cradled in her arms.

Red said, "Looks like a Mexican stand-off. It's my turn to talk now, friends. I'm sayin' Tom Mulligan can think about Cull's murder. I'm sayin' Blue did it partly to please Mulligan. Crown owned Blue. Crown tries to own everyone in this county. Well, friends, it ain't healthy." Daniel Starrett and Jobe Craven had come cautiously from their hiding places. They saw the riders sitting silent beneath the guns of the sheriff and his deputy and grew bolder, crossing the street to take up places at the sheriff's side.

Red said, "Yuh can see it ain't healthy. It's plumb bad. An outfit owns too much, it wants to own too much more, there is bound to be trouble. Crown's all right. Dev, Slim, and the boys have only followed orders. I got ideas what's happened. But I'm ready to let it go, to stay here and live among my neighbors..."

The silence was profound. Mulligan's face was scarlet. He cranked his head around and stared at Della Lace. Her rifle was pointed straight at him.

Red said, "Tom, you and me have fought. I'll fight you again, any time. But you got to know you can't buy us out. I'm payin' off Della's share of Lace Ranch. I've got the cash in an El Paso bank, and I don't mind sayin' I borrowed part of it in Mexico. But I'm stockin' our both places and runnin' them as two outfits. That's fair. You keep to Crown; we'll keep to our homes. We can get along all right."

Mulligan could not find words to answer. He wheeled his horse slowly, however. His riders fell in behind him. They moved down Main Street, going west.

The smaller ranchers did not go with him. They remained, and their faces were turned to Starrett and Craven. Red said, "That's right. Borrow and pay Mulligan off. You can do it. This is a bumper year. I got top prices in Mexico for beef—that's a sign it'll be high here."

He rode Gringo across the street. He heard Hack Lee say to his deputy, "Nice work. I'm puttin' you on permanent, Will. Okay?"

"Sartain," said the deputy. He spat. He said, "Looky thet Red pick up thet gal. Trick stuff, ain't it?"

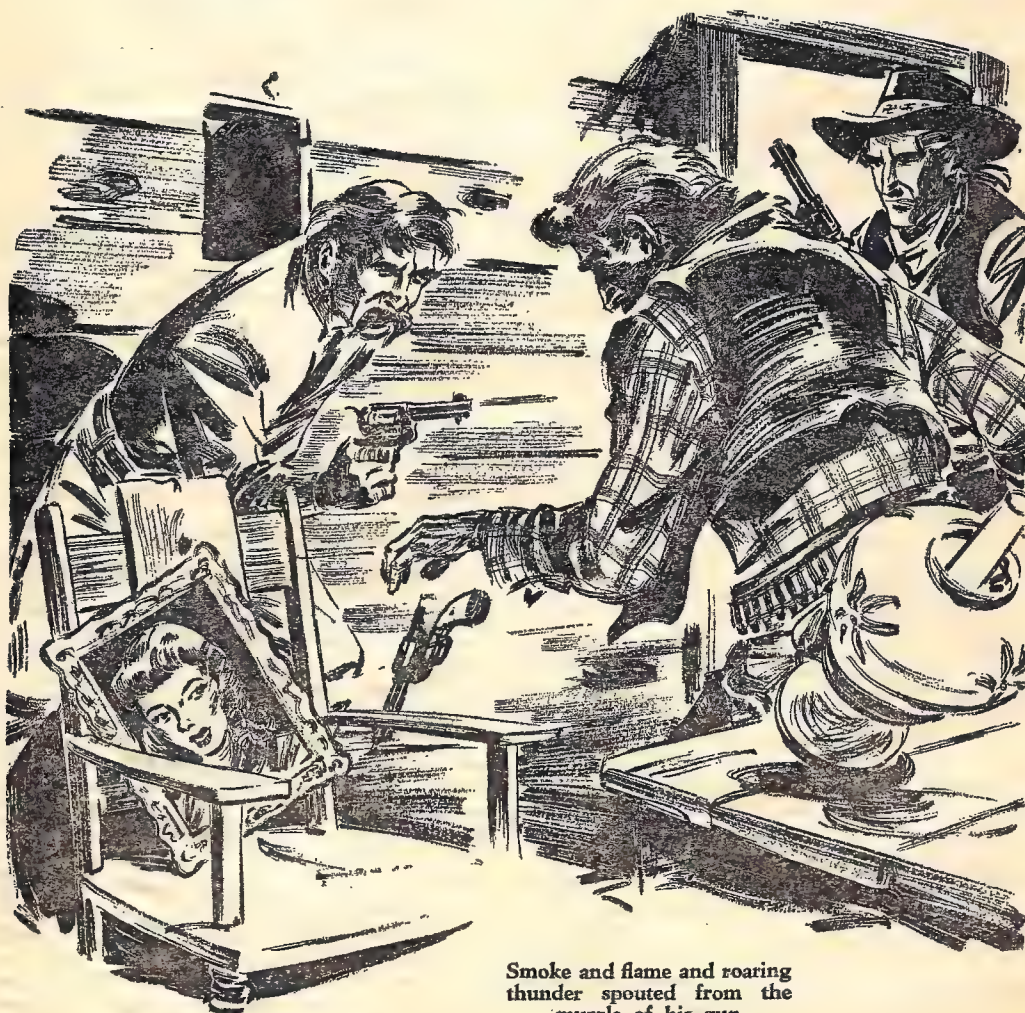
LAST TALLY

By GUNNISON STEELE

The road to Boothill became mighty crowded when old Sam Burns unlimbered the gun that had once blazed an owlhoot trail through the roaring frontier, and started doing a landslide business as a dead-shot usher for wayfarers to Hell!

THEY had Sam Burns cold, these hard-case hombres who had stopped at his cabin at Ute Springs an hour before. Same knew that, whatever happened before then, they meant finally to kill him.

Sam Burns was a wiry, mild-eyed little man, crowding sixty, with down-curling mustaches. Sitting there on the bunk, he regarded the two with a calm serenity that was tinged with regret. One of them, Cherokee Ralls, was tall, dark, with hawkish features and cold black eyes. Reno Red Tybee was blocky,



Smoke and flame and roaring thunder spouted from the muzzle of his gun.

red-haired, with pale cruel eyes. They were, they'd told Sam Burns at first, cattle buyers, and they'd kind of lost their way in this back country. They'd asked Sam if they could have a drink of water and a bite to eat.

Sam had mighty few visitors here at his little place on the edge of the Sunblaze Hills, so his cordiality was real enough. He'd cooked up a meal which the two had wolfed down. Now, suddenly, they had guns in their hands. "That was a pretty good feed, Burns," Cherokee said derisively. "Now we can get down to business!"

If Sam was surprised or scared he didn't show it. He wore no gun, and there was none in sight anywhere.

"So you're not cattle buyers," he said gently.

"We been called plenty things, but not that. Not cattle buyers, though we've dealt some in beef."

"What do you want here?"

"You'll find out soon enough. But just so we'll savvy each other right off, old man, we're not on speakin' terms with the law. There's big bounties on both our scalps. So you savvy we won't stand for any foolishness."

"If you figure to rob me, you're out of luck," Sam said. "I don't make much off here, just enough to live on—"

"We know all about you, so save yore breath," Cherokee growled. "For fifteen years, back yonder when you were younger, you rode the owlhoot trails. You were knowed as one of the fastest gents with a smokepole between Canada and the Rio Grande. You was hell-on-wheels with a cyclone tied to its tail. You stuck up banks and stages over half a dozen states—"

"No more than half a dozen in all—and then only when I was hungry."

"And I reckon you never killed anybody that didn't need killin'?" Reno Red jeered.

"I never killed but four men, and they all needed it bad. I winged a lot more, when I could have killed 'em just as well."

"Hogwash! Way I heard it, you beefed at least a dozen men with that fancy pearl-handled hog-leg you wore. Had a picture of a woman carved on the handle, didn't it?"

Sam nodded, a far look in his mild eyes.

"A girl. Her name was Rose. She was my wife. I had a little place there in Montana, and I'd built a fine cabin to take her to when we married. We'd been married less than a month when it happened. One night we heard somebody call out, and when I opened the door four riders were there in the moonlight before the cabin. They didn't say anything, just started shootin' into the cabin. The first two bullets knocked me down on the floor. Rose got hold of me and tried to pull me back into the cabin. Then the night-ridin' skunks shot her too. They killed her."

Cherokee Ralls scowled. "That's yore story, but I heard different."

"I'd recognized the riders there in the moonlight," Sam went on softly. "One of them was a big ranch owner named Bogart who'd been tryin' to crowd me off my strip, the three others rode for him. It was a month before I could walk, two more before I could fork a horse. I killed Bogart first, then the others, one at a time, all in fair fights. But it happened that this Sid Bogart had been as powerful as he was crooked. He owned the sheriff, prosecutin' attorney and all the rest. His son slapped a murder charge against me, and made it stick. So I took to the owlhoot. I had that picture of Rose carved on my gun handle so I wouldn't be so lonesome at night out in the badlands."

"You got me weepin' big tears," Cherokee sneered. "You think anybody'd believe that pack of lies. After the law caught up with you—"

"It didn't catch up with me," Sam denied. "I gave myself up because I was tired of runnin' and dodgin' and hidin'. I drew a ten-year sentence, and I served my time. Then I come down here to Arizona and started this little outfit. I've lived straight, and my neighbors respect me."

"We heard all about how you've got the wool pulled over folks' eyes. Honest and peace-lovin'. Don't even pack a gun any more, do you? Where's that fancy cannon with the girl's picture on the handle?"

"I put it away. I don't need a gun here."

"Old man," Cherokee said, "one of the men you killed nearly thirty years ago, was my daddy."

"I'd guessed that," Sam nodded. "You look a lot like he did then. Luke Ralls was his name. I recognized him there in the moonlight before he—"

"That's a cussed lie!" snarled the dark outlaw. "And you ain't got me fooled any. You ain't here in this gosh-forsaken hole for yore health. While folks on this range think you're just a harmless, dumb old coot, you're stealin' and robbin' 'em blind. You've got a regular gold mine!"

"What do you want?" Sam asked.

"First, some of the dinero you've taken off these suckers. You couldn't take a lot of money to the bank, because somebody might get suspicious. So you must have it cached somewhere about the place."

"And how about all that bank and stage loot?" Reno Red asked. "None of it was found when they sent him to Deer Lodge, so he must have had it cached. He'll have that here, too."

"There wasn't any stage or bank loot," Sam protested. "I never took more'n enough to buy grub—"

"Stop lyin', you ol' has-been!" Cherokee spat. "You aim to tell us where that cache is?"

"I never said there was a cache," Sam said quietly.

"You didn't have to! And we don't have to beg you—you'll do the beggin', before we're through with you."

He stepped forward, slapped Sam Burns across the face, knocking his head back against the wall. Sam was unarmed, and so offered no resistance. He looked up at Cherokee, a slight puzzlement and regret showing in his mild eyes.

Cherokee said wickedly, "You'll talk. You don't deny you've got a cinch here, do you, somethin' good as a gold mine?"

"Why should I deny it?" Sam asked quietly. "Sure, I've got a good thing here, somethin' better than a gold mine. And I don't aim to lose it."

Cherokee swore savagely, he shoved Sam back against the bunk and held him there helpless. Still Sam didn't fight back.

"Stick yore knife blade in that stove and get it hot, Red," Cherokee ordered. "We'll see whether or not he talks!"

Grimming with wicked anticipation, Reno Red obeyed.

"Lots of things you can do with a red-hot knife blade," Cherokee gloated, glaring down at the helpless oldster. "And don't think I won't enjoy workin' on you, for beefin' my old man. After I clean out that cache, I aim to collect back pay."

"**I—YOU WIN, boys,**" Sam said hoarsely, ten minutes later. "I can't stand no more."

The two owlhooters sucked in their breath greedily.

"Where's the cache?" Cherokee demanded angrily.

"I'll show you."

They released the wiry oldster and he sat up. His face was gray with pain, his eyes haggard and bitter.

"See that picture there on the wall, that picture of Rose? Behind it is a panel you can slide back, and you'll see a hole in the wall. That's it."

"Open it," Cherokee commanded.

Sam got up and crossed the room, his bare feet leaving blood stains on the floor, and paused before the framed picture of a young, smiling girl. The picture was no more than shoulder high. With unsteady hands Sam removed the picture from the wall and placed it on a chair.

An improvised panel several inches square was revealed. Sam removed the panel, leaving a dark hole in the wall.

Sam turned, misery in his eyes. "There's the cache. Help yoreselves to what little's in it."

"And maybe run our hands into a bear trap?" Cherokee said warily. "You better hand out the loot—pronto!" His hand moved suggestively to his knife.

The oldster sighed, turned and slid his hand into the aperture. And then, suddenly, Sam Burns was no longer just a wiry, soft-voiced, meek-eyed man who so hated violence that he refused to wear a gun.

He withdrew the hand, whirled, sent his body sideways in a cat-like leap, all in the same incredibly quick and coordinated movement. Smoke and flame and roaring thunder came spouting from the muzzle of the gun in his hand.

Cherokee and Reno Red, their guns already in hand, reacted swiftly and violently. Snarling with hate-inflamed fury, their own guns jerked up.

But Sam's act had been so unexpected, his fire so swift and deadly accurate, that they didn't have a chance. Four shots, each bullet placed where he wanted it, bellowed from his gun in such quick succession that it sounded almost like one giant explosion. Cherokee's one shot blasted into the ceiling as Sam's lead hammered him backward against the wall and to the floor. Reno Red broke in the middle and fell forward on his face like a man going to sleep. For a long moment, then, Sam stood there his eyes pensively regarding the bodies.

Coughing from the bitter gunsmoke that burned his nostrils, Sam Burns felt his way to the door and outside into the sunshine. He drew deep breaths of cool, sweet air into his lungs, an old regret dark and heavy inside him. He hadn't wanted to do this, but he hadn't been able to make Cherokee and Reno Red understand that there wasn't any money cache.

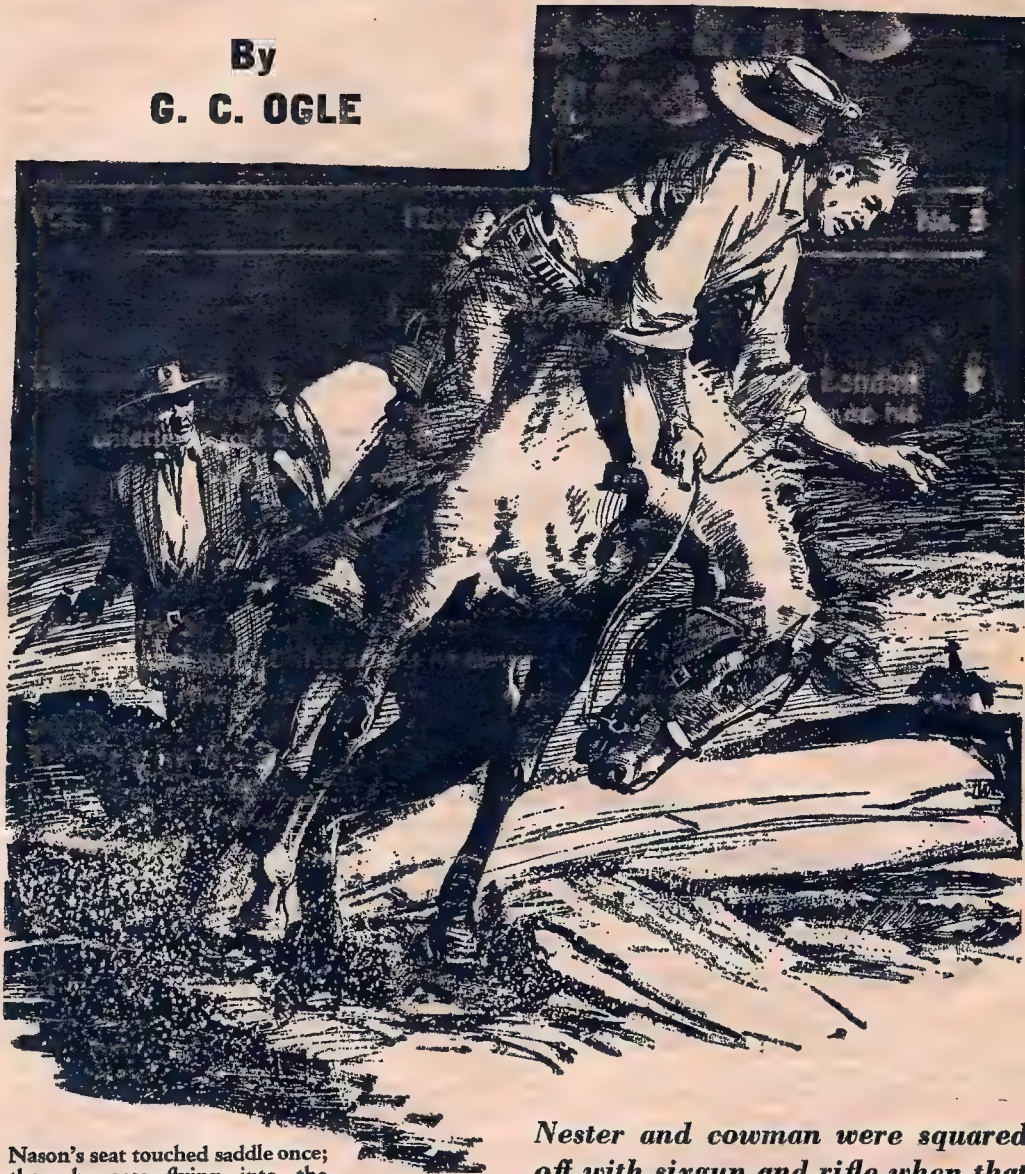
Maybe if he hadn't said, "Sure, I've got a good thing here, somethin' better than a gold mine."

But yonder was a stream of cold, clear water threading the fertile valley where cattle grazed in belly-deep grass. Yonder were dark pines, slender and graceful against the sky, the wind in their branches singing its endless song of peace and beauty. Beyond, gleaming cathedrals in the late sun, silver and gold and purple flames staining their crests, were the mountains. These things, along with the friendship and respect of honest neighbors, were worth more to Sam than all the world's gold.

The regret no longer in his eyes, Sam looked down at the gun in his hand. The pretty, sweet-faced girl on its pearl handle smiled up at him.

THE PISTOL PREACHMENT OF OBADIAH JONES

By
G. C. OGLE



Nason's seat touched saddle once;
then he was flying into the
darkness.

A NOON-TIME vertical sun shortened Reverend Obadiah Jones' six-foot-five shadow to a blob in the yellow dust when he arrived in Prosperity. He stood there a moment before Soapy Stone's saloon, big-boned and gauntly powerful, wiping the grime from his craggy face.

Nester and cowman were squared off with sixgun and rifle when that giant sky-pilot, Obadiah Jones, rode into the dust-dry streets of Prosperity to pray that drouth-ridden country into water, talk it into repentance, and shoot it into submission!

He listened to the clamor of voices flooding out through the open doors and windows. His short chin-beard, as fiery red as his tossing mane, crackled electrically. For the voices were edged with anger. It sounded as though hell were due to bust loose soon inside the saloon.

Obadiah's fierce blue eyes speared down the short street that bisected the forlorn little cowtown in Elk Horn Valley. The town lay there under a hot August sky, scorched close to lifelessness. For '87's drouth was a thing to remember.

The heat had pressed down relentlessly now for a hundred days. It was like a living, evil thing, that had been spawned in Hell and allowed to torment the helpless land, until the belief of men in God's mercy was shriveling.

Even Elk Horn's abundant water supply was failing. Only in Salvation Canyon did it still pool and trickle in quantity. And the Four 8's was threatening to fence off the gap that led to the parched and stricken valley from the canyon.

Sim Partlow ramrodded the Four 8's. It was a vast domain of canyon-slashed, rolling grasslands on the divide between the Powder River and the Applegate.

It had taken Obadiah two revivals and much personal persuasion to get the cattle king up to the mourner's bench. It looked now as if Sim had backslid a hell of a way to be breaking the Tenth Commandment already. He must surely covet the homesteads of the nesters to act so ornery.

So Obadiah was in Prosperity to drag Sim back from the brink of the Pit and avert the shedding of blood. It would surely be spilled if Sim fenced off the gap, for the settlers would try to cut the wire.

But Sim's cow prods were as loyal to him as a hound pup to a ten-year-old boy. If he posted them beyond the barricade with iron in their holsters, they'd use it when men tried to cut Four 8 wire. They'd have the law on their side, but it would be murder in Obadiah's eyes. For the settlers wouldn't have a chance—unless a good military leader set their ranks in order and deployed them properly.

The only sign of life Obadiah observed was the dozen droop-headed ponies dozing under a row of cottonwoods that leaned over the street in withered resignation—that and the angry voices in Soapy Stone's saloon. So he hitched the weary Stonewall to a tie rack by himself.

The claybank stallion, standing a full seventeen hands high, was caked with dust and steaming. Most cayuses would have dropped dead on the trail. For Obadiah had straddled him seventy hard miles since yesterday noon when he'd got word that hell was due to bust loose in Prosperity.

OBADIAH felt the heat seeping up through the soles of his cowhide boots as he tethered the jug-headed, vicious brute. Then his feet were pounding urgently on the steps leading to the saloon.

He felt no compunction about entering it. He walked into saloons every day without giving it a thought. Where his flock gathered, he went to tend it.

Obadiah felt a measure of relief as he stared inside through sun-narrowed eyes. For he spotted Sim Partlow leaning on the bar.

The cattlemen was a spare oldster with drooping white mustaches and a thin, lined face. The weather-beaten old hardcase with the bowed legs asked no puncher how his graze and herds stood the drought. He knew. He spent twelve-hours a day in the saddle. He had a booming bass voice and he had all the stops out as he bellowed in argument with a new-come nester Obadiah didn't know.

The nester was big—big and bulky. It began with his underpinning, big splay feet and thick calves that bulged over the tops of the low leather boots his gray trousers were stuffed into. Powerful thighs arched into a thick muscular torso. Over his broad belly the tallow was thickening from forty years of heavy eating. The cotton shirt open at the bull neck disclosed the deep chest. It was hairless.

So were the round cheeks with the network of withered lines. A battered Stetson was pushed back on the nester's black, bullet poll, and cunning black eyes were set beside the wide, flat nose. The mouth was also wide. But there was determination in the thin lips and in the stubborn chin.

"Lookit, Nason!" Sim bellowed. "For the last time, I'm telling you that your brainless, stinking sheep can't water in Salvation! What did you bring them into the valley for, anyway?"

Nason's voice was unctuous as he said smugly: "I am a shepherd of the Lord. He guided me and my poor flock to this fruitful vale. May they multiply abundantly under His blessing."

His hands were folded over his big belly and he rolled his cunning eyes piously. Obadiah felt his gorge against Nason rising. The fellow had no right to bring his sheep into a cattle country. But they were here. He'd have to make the best of it. Sim would likely agree to some reasonable settlement.

He hadn't backslid. Obadiah's heart felt lifted up. For when he put his brand on a maverick he wanted it to stay put.

"Let them multiply!" bellowed the exasperated Sim. "But the bleating critters can't pollute my cattle's water supply!"

"I have prayed unto the Lord," Nason said meekly. "He has told me my flocks shall water in Salvation. For here have I pitched my

tent, even as Isaac pitched his in the valley of Gerar. And let not the hand of the wicked be lifted against me, lest they be smitten, even as David smote the Amelkites from the twilight until the evening of the next day."

Sim's temper boiled over. He roared, "No sanctimonious son can quote Scripture at me! Now! Let's see you and David do something about this!"

He slapped Nason stingingly on the cheek! Angry red leaped on the hairless cheek and the big nester stumbled back. But Sim crowded after him, cuffing the nester with his open palm.

There were perhaps a score of men in the saloon. A couple were Four 8 line riders, the rest were nesters and townies set loose from the weekly grind by Sunday. Every eye was focussed on the humiliation Sim was piling on Nason.

As yet nobody had spotted Obadiah standing in the doorway. Indignation worked on his face. But not at Sim. For Obadiah wasn't one of the meek and lowly who expect to inherit the earth by turning the other cheek when slapped. The only man who'd ever laid hand to him was a drunken wife-beater who'd promptly receipted for a broken jaw as Obadiah's crushing fist drove him to the ground.

No. His anger was directed toward the giant Nason who was letting a little old gamecock like Sim slap him all over the place. It outraged Obadiah's sense of decency to see so powerful a man with so little spirit.

Now the fellow was whining, "Stop it, you man of Baal! I am a servant of the Lord."

Obadiah considered it plumb indecent to drag the Lord into such a piddling little fuss. Then Nason seemed to come to a powerful resolve. His cunning eyes searched around him. He saw he was pocketed in the angle between a card table and the wall. He said piously, "The Lord gives life and He takes. Forgive me, thy servant—"

And all the while he was fumbling at the .45 he had secreted in the waistband of his trousers inside the cotton shirt.

In the split second before Obadiah ducked his red head to go charging in through the door, or his lips framed words, he saw the whole scene. It was like motion suspended as his mind worked lightning fast.

Sim dropped back, his jaw sagging with surprise. He didn't go for his holstered iron—not yet. He just stared.

The two Four 8 hands were playing pedro for drinks with a couple of townies. They reared up fast. The table upset, cascading the cards and chips to the floor.

A couple of nesters perched on chairs and watching the game, fell out of the open window behind them. Others dropped to the floor.

Some of them stood staring like dumb oxen.

Soapy Stone stopped grinning his enjoyment as he leaned on his bar, watching Sim cuff Nason. He grabbed his bungstarter and came crowding out sideways like a bald-headed, benevolent porker going to war. The light of battle shone in his popped, dirty gooseberry eyes and his teeth were bared beneath the short-clipped brown mustache.

Still Nason fumbled with his gun. It seemed incredible that a man could take so long. And still Sim stared and waited. Obadiah wondered if he were going to stand there and do nothing, and why he couldn't shout the command that swelled in his throat.

The muzzles of the cow prods' iron were clearing holsters. But Nason's was out now, clenched in his big, hairless fist. It was swinging toward Sim. Then the oldest leaped sideways and went for his gun. Obadiah's voice roared, "Stop, you fools!"

A score of men swung to see him charging into the saloon with blazing eyes. Soapy belowed delightedly, "It's Jonesy! And am I glad to see the red-headed son! Now we can have a revival instead of a burying!"

His words were blurred by roaring six-guns. Obadiah counted them—three, quick-spaced shots from the door at the back which led to the rear through a short passage. Then there were two more, almost together, from the side of the room where Sim and Nason faced each other.

Powdersmoke clouded the room momentarily. But Obadiah had glimpsed the man framed in the door before it slammed. There were pounding footsteps in the passage, then the sound of galloping hoofs.

OBADIAH never forget a face. He promised himself grimly that he'd remember the lantern-jawed, lanky rannie who'd silently opened the door and spewed death into the room. Obadiah turned. The two Four 8 cowhands were clawing at the board floor with death glazing their eyes and lead in their briskets. Sim was down too, but he was alive and groaning.

No, Obadiah wouldn't forget the gunnie whose salt-and-pepper stubble beard vainly tried to hide the scar that welted on his jaw, even though he'd stared into those glittering black eyes for but the fraction of a second.

But now other things claimed his time. There was roaring confusion in the barroom until the panicked crowd erupted from the death-struck room. They went boiling out, jostling and crowding, through the windows and doors.

Obadiah didn't blame them. It is one thing to face death in the heat of conflict, and another to be struck down by chance lead in a barroom shoot-out.

There was silence then, broken only by Sim's groans and the clack of Soapy's bung-starter as he laid it on the polished bar. Slowly the powdersmoke cleared.

Obadiah's blazing blue eyes flicked over Nason. The big nester was staring down at Sim. A wisp of smoke curled languidly out of the muzzle of his .45. The big man's face wore a look of utter consternation, tinged with horror.

"May the Lord forgive me!" he groaned. "I've—I've reddened my hands with the blood of my brother. I—I never meant to. I only wanted to frighten the man of Baal who grievously afflicted God's servant."

But Obadiah had caught the look of gloating satisfaction on the lemon-colored, moon-face as Sim fell, then was quickly chased off. He bellowed furiously, "You've reddened your soul with blood, you whining hypocrite! But not your hands. Look!"

He pointed to the floor where Nason's lead had dug slivers from the planks. Sharp awareness glinted in the cunning eyes as the fellow stared at Obadiah fleetingly. Then he looked at the floor and humble thankfulness replaced the horrified look.

"May the Lord be praised!" Nason murmured devoutly.

Obadiah made no reply. He was afraid he'd said too much already. He felt a certainty that Nason and the killers were in cahoots. The big man would be the brains. He was dangerous.

Obadiah didn't know what they plotted. It would help him to find out if he pretended ignorance of the killer.

Soapy came squeezing out from behind his bar. He pumped Obadiah's hand vigorously, and cried delightedly, "Man, man, Reverend! You're sure a sight for sore eyes this blasted hot day! Will you be having a nip of Planter's Delight to rinse the dust off your holy tonsils?"

"Later, Soapy," Obadiah said absently. "Let's see what we can do for Sim."

He knelt beside the white-faced oldster, who lay with closed eyes. Sim opened his eyes, then. He grinned crookedly.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Jonesy, but there won't be six men walking slow for me just yet. The blasted nester got me in the shoulder. Guess I fainted, huh? The old constitution must be failing." He grinned wryly. "But I guess my boys downed the pious-talking son, Jonesy. I thought I heard shots. Did they stitch that nester's gizzard with lead?"

He stared up into Obadiah's face expectantly.

The red-headed preacher gently shook his head.

"They ain't dead?" Sim shouted incredulously.

Obadiah nodded sorrowful confirmation.

"That blasted—that nester downed my two boys too?"

Obadiah's silence was eloquent. Sim was galvanized into action. He had to clench his teeth to choke back the groans. But he sat up. And when his eyes clashed with those of the meek-appearing Nason, who still lingered, he scrambled to his feet cursing.

"So my boys didn't get you!" he bellowed. "But I will!"

He leaned down to pick up the sixgun he'd dropped, but Obadiah kicked it away and grabbed the nearly fainting oldster.

"Give me my iron!" Sim roared.

"Not yet, Sim. Pick it up, Soapy. And Nason, I want your gun handed over, too. We're done with gun-talk."

"Gladly, Reverend," Nason said unctuously, handing Soapy his .45. "I, too, have toiled in the Lord's vineyard. Nason's the name, sir. And yours?"

He extended his hand in fellowship.

"The Reverend Obadiah Jones," was the preacher's sour answer.

Obadiah ignored the extended hand. Presently it dropped heavily to Nason's side. No flicker of emotion betrayed the nester's chagrin.

OBADIAH'S religious tolerance covered all his flock. They were the cowmen and nesters who sprinkled the whole tier of cow counties north and south of the Oregon line. He rode herd on them vigilantly, warmly, understandingly. He married them and buried them, mended their harness and sharpened ploughshares, and even assisted at birthing them on occasion, when the midwife was late.

But politically he was still an unreconstructed rebel, even after twenty years in the west. For Obadiah had swung a flashing saber under Jeb Stuart.

Sim clutched the bar to stay upright and sneered, "You're a hell of a parson to ride herd on us folks. I thought you were a two-fisted man of God. But you're just like the other mealy-mouthed Bible punchers that never stayed more'n a week!"

"Why, Sim?" Obadiah asked mildly.

"Because you won't let me down that blasted sheepherder who stands there grinning after killing my two men!"

"Soapy, break Nason's gun open," Obadiah commanded.

Soapy let the cartridges slip out of the cylinder into his fat palm. Obadiah pointed to the one empty shell.

"One slug didn't kill two men and nick your shoulder, Sim. Besides, it's there in the floor."

"Then who did down them?" the staring Sim demanded.

"I don't know yet," Obadiah replied. "But

I aim to find out with the help of Nason."

"Him?" snorted Sim. "He's a nester, ain't he? So will he give away one of his breed? Don't try to make me swallow that, Jonesy!"

"He'll help me," Obadiah replied confidently.

He expected the big man's help to be given mighty unwillingly, but by publicly numbering the big man with the just, he'd throw him off guard if he was siding the scar-faced rannie secretly.

"I shall pray for help," Nason said. "And the prayers of the meek are answered."

"They are, hey?" Sim sneered. He rubbed his stubbled jaw reflectively. "Um—all right. Start praying. And pray for water! Because I'm going to fence off that gap, and it'll stay fenced until you produce the snake-bellied skunk who downed my boys!"

He smiled in savage enjoyment. Obadiah was watching Nason. He caught the triumphant gleam that shone out of the nester's eyes. Then the heavy lids drooped.

So that was it. Nason wanted the gap fenced off. But why? His band of sheep would die along with the homesteader's cattle. It didn't make sense on the face of it.

Obadiah figured the answer lay in Nason's cunning brain. But he couldn't read it—not yet. He might later. In the meantime the crisis he'd hoped to avert was on him, for Sim absolutely refused to change his mind. All Obadiah's reasoned arguments went for naught. But he stuck to his guns while he pulled off his coat and dressed the cattleman's wound.

Obadiah figured the argument helped Sim through the painful ordeal. The oldster got so angry he was bellowing at the preacher during the tough times, as he sat in his chair, clenching the arms with white-knuckled hands.

Obadiah got a little angry too. It showed in the flaring red spots on his gaunt cheeks and in his flashing blue eyes.

Nason said nothing. He only waited, meek and humble.

Then it was finished. Obadiah leaned against the bar. He towered over the stumpy Soapy and topped the big Nason by three inches. But he had disproportionately long legs, and his big-boned wrists thrust down below the sleeves of his black frock coat that the passing years had faded to green.

It generally astonished the beholder to see Obadiah settle into the rope sling beneath a Stillson scale and balance the bar at two hundred twenty. For he was narrow in the shoulders and hips, with a flat, hard slab of a belly. But his big bones were knit together with powerful muscles and his chest was deep.

Soapy set out glasses and a bottle of bourbon. Obadiah poured a generous slug as Nason watched in pretended amazement. The

preacher said sourly, "I do nothing secretly, hoping even the Lord won't be looking. There is no more sin in using Soapy's good bourbon, taken in reason, than there is eating. Gluttony is a sin though, in both."

He stared meaningly at Nason's lardy belly as Soapy snickered. Then he tossed off his three fingers, turned, and picked up Sim in his big arms.

Obadiah argued with Sim all during the ride to the Four 8's. It lasted through most of the night, for both were stubborn men. Sim kept repeating with many variations his challenge that Obadiah produce the killer. "Then I'll take my wire down," he'd finish.

"But the settlers' cattle will die within a week if I don't find him! What about them? And what about your own soul, you stiff-necked old son?" was the boiled-down gist of Obadiah's eloquent pleading.

"I'm in good hands," Sim grinned. "You'll keep right on interceding for me—even if I am a stiff-necked old son."

Obadiah had to admit to himself that this was true. Sim went even further, saying slyly, "You might pray, Jonesy, to have your flock delivered from the drouth. Nason allows how the prayers of the meek are answered. But—ahem—nobody could accuse you of being meek. So I guess it's no dice. But no harm in trying."

"Silence, you impious old sinner!" Obadiah roared in righteous anger. "If you weren't a sick man I'd stuff yours words down your throat with my knuckles! The wise man doesn't ask God to go against the laws of Nature. Instead, he asks for wisdom, so he can live within the bounds she sets!"

Obadiah started to stamp off angrily to bed. Sim's guffaw followed him. Then, at the door, he stopped. He stood staring. A startling idea had come to him. Maybe his silent plea for wisdom in the present crisis had been answered already.

He couldn't be quite sure yet. But—

The whole lay of Elk Horn valley unrolled before him. Maybe Nason had the same idea. If the fellow was trying to buy more land—

Soapy would know. He turned back and said exultantly, "If I deliver the valley from the drouth, will you promise to repent—and stay that way?"

"Sure will," Sim grinned. Then he sobered, and said, "Jonesy, don't do it! You know well's I do that it'll be six weeks before the equinoctial storms break the drouth. Blast it, man! Do you want those nesters to lose their faith in you? You'd sure look silly praying for rain now. It just can't happen!"

"Nevertheless, I shall pray tomorrow for the valley to be delivered from drouth if the signs are propitious!" he said triumphantly. "You will come?"

"If they have to carry me. What time?"

"At noon, if I feel moved."

Sim's eyes were troubled. He thought bitterly, "I'll have to cut the wire in the finish. Maybe that's what that red-headed fanatic is banking on. But by the hammerlocks of Hell, I'll make them sweat first! Maybe if Jonesy can't move the equinox ahead, they'll rear up and chase that blasted Nason out of the country."

THE TWO murdered cowhands were laid to rest in the Four 8 burying ground the following morning. Then Obadiah slapped his rig on Stonewall.

He stepped aboard the claybank stallion that had never been straddled until he was seven years old. Few buckaroos had straddled the horse since Obadiah himself had gentled him. None had remained on his ornery back longer than twenty seconds.

The jug-headed brute flattened his ears meanly and instantly left the ground. He pitched high and handsome and came down stiff-legged and bawling his rage. But Obadiah's leather-booted calves were gripping his flanks like a vise.

The stallion recognized the futility of the never-ending feud between himself and his master. Each time Obadiah stepped aboard he bucked—then speared off at a dead run.

Obadiah let him ramble down the trail that led to Salvation. It always lifted up his heart to feel the wind of their passing cool his craggy, big-nosed face, as Stonewall laid his belly to the ground and worked off his excess energy.

Obadiah was fiddle-footed. He could have had his choice of a dozen good pastures. Instead, he chose the half-tamed rangelands where he was always on the move.

Now he snugged his stiff-brimmed, black range hat tight to his flaming red poll and lifted up his sonorous baritone in a song of Christian triumph.

Both he and Stonewall were fresh as dewed daisies after their night's rest, but there were neither daisies nor dew in Salvation. Instead, there came gusty puffs of hot air sucking up the canyon. The valley would be an oven by noon. It looked like a poor day to pray for rain. But the distant equinox had no part in Obadiah's plans.

Instead, he rode up the canyon a piece and surveyed its walls. They were mostly shale that pitched steeply down to the bedrock furrow in the fold of the land. Here and there the granite was exposed. And always on its smooth surface there was moisture. Maybe but a seep, sometimes a small trickle.

Now Obadiah knew why Salvation never failed. He closely observed the rising angle of the bedrock beneath the shale. Then he

rode up through the gap. Sim's crew were already setting posts and stringing wire. In another hour the gap would be closed.

"Tell Sim the signs are right!" Obadiah called.

"Sure, Jonesy," the foreman replied. "We'll all be there to watch you strut your stuff. I'm wearing my slicker, too."

The men laughed good-naturedly. Evidently the news had run ahead of Obadiah.

Already, cattle drifting down the valley for their morning watering were bunched up where the wire crossed the trail. They stood there and stared down the canyon and bawled. Mostly they were gaunted bone-bags. They were too listless to switch the flies that clotted their backs or to horn a crowding new-comer. They just stood there with that hopeless look in their soft brown eyes and bawled tiredly.

There were buzzards sailing in wide-looping spirals in the brassy sky. As Obadiah rode up the valley he watched them dropping lower. Below the circling carrion eaters, an old cow whose strength was drained by the late calf she suckled, staggered along a dried-up stream bed. There wasn't a drop of moisture in it—only a dirty, whitish-gray scum that had hardened until it crackled under her tottering hooves.

Presently she pitched forward on her nose and stretched out with a wheezing sigh. Obadiah knew she'd never stand again. He rode up close and ended her suffering.

He couldn't prevent the buzzards from picking her bones. But at least they wouldn't pick her eyes out before she died. He holstered his .45 beneath the skirt of his black coat and rode on.

Sorrow softened Obadiah's fierce blue eyes. That was what troubled him most: the suffering of the stock and the women folk—those who gave life. Always they suffered the worst when drouth and famine struck.

But if the Lord held his hand a little while, drouth would never again lay its blight on Elk Horn valley.

When Obadiah questioned Soapy he learned that Nason had made offers for several homesteads. Now it made sense to him why the big man wanted the gap shut. He was trading his pitiful band of sheep for a thousand acres that would green under the magic touch of water.

But Soapy couldn't identify the scar-faced gunny who'd thrown sudden lead through that back door. He had to be a hired gun-swift Nason had fetched, knowing he'd have use for him.

AGAIN Obadiah stood on Soapy's front porch. It was noon. He gazed down into the expectant faces of almost all of Elk Horn Valley's population.

Benches had been brought. The sunbonneted women in faded calico dresses sat under the shade of the cottonwoods. Fretful babies whimpered. Barefooted kids stared up solemnly, wise beyond their years in the fierce struggle for existence. The men stood in clumps—all but Nason. Meek and humble, he had a front seat.

And behind them all, Sim Partlow and his gun-toting cow prods sat saddle in a semicircle. The nesters greeted them with surly looks. There was a tension in the air. It needed but a spark to flare into violence.

The audience forgot Obadiah's ungainliness when he preached. Zeal burned in him like a fire; it blazed in his blue eyes and crackled in his flaming-red chin-beard. His voice was sonorous, rolling thunderously or stinging like a popping whip; then it would gentle, become pleading.

He always brought a powerful message. When he preached one of his Hellfire and brimstone sermons and called upon the sinners to repent, they came crowding up like thirsty cattle.

"You know," he began, "how grievously the Lord has afflicted this valley. It is not for us to ask why. It is rather for us to come humbly, beseeching deliverance. This we will do today."

"Amen!" Nason bawled piously.

Obadiah stared down at him acidly. He said, "First, let us ask for wisdom."

His prayer was short, for he had compassion for the teething babies and the patient folk broiling under the sun. At the finish, Nason's Amen again rang loud.

"Now we turn to the Bible to find out what folks did in olden times when afflicted by drouth. Let me read from Kings, II, Chapter three. . . and they fetched a compass of seven days journey: and there was no water for the host, and for the cattle that followed them. . . Then he (Elisha) said: "Thus saith the Lord: Make this valley full of ditches. For thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water, that ye may drink, both ye, and your cattle, and your beasts."'"

The crowd gazed at Obadiah in puzzled wonder. Sim Partlow grinned sadly and tapped his forehead with a stubby forefinger.

"Nobody home," he grunted. "The heat's got him—or why would he be gabbing about water filling ditches when there ain't none?"

Only Nason seemed to get the idea. He sat crouched now, staring at Obadiah between the spread fingers of his two hands. He offered no Amen. Obadiah spoke directly to Partlow.

"Your point is well taken, Sim. But neither did Elisha have water. He produced it without either rain or wind. How? Most likely he dug wells. *And so will we!*"

"By the hammerlocks of Hell!" boomed Sim. "I've been outsmarted again by that red-headed son."

A lanky homesteader reared up, and complained: "But, Reverend, I dug a well thirty feet a couple of years ago. Nothing but yellow clay—and it'll take maybe ten days to dig one. Anyway, who's got a pump if we do find water? Or are we going to bail it out with a dipper?"

"I'm not surprised you didn't find water," Obadiah replied coldly. "You probably dug on a rocky knoll, hoping you wouldn't. But if you'd gone ten feet deeper you'd have struck the water sands that clay seals in! This valley is a natural drainage way—that's where the water in Salvation comes from! So I'm going to drive a well straight through it and artesian water will come gushing out by dark tomorrow night. Now! I want volunteers. For it will take sweat as well as prayer to punch a hole through that clay!"

One of the nesters had a forge and anvil. There Obadiah fashioned his point, a steel cone eighteen inches long and four inches thick at the base. To the center of this he welded his first length of two-inch pipe which was punched full of holes near the bottom to admit the water when the pipe entered the underground stream. The whole thing resembled a cumbersome spear.

Then an old woman who had the gift witched for water. Holding a forked willow twig before her, she slowly paced across the valley. Her elbows were pressed to her sides and the tips of her fingers gripped the slender forks. The nails of her fingers were up and her thumbs stuck out at right angles from her hands.

As she slowly paced forward, the fork would dip from time to time. Then, near the center of the valley it pulled down harder and harder until the grip of her finger tips tore the very bark from the twigs!

"Dig here!" she ordered.

So Obadiah started his well there. He'd intended to, anyway, figuring it was the natural place. But he wasn't one to overlook a helpful sign.

He climbed on his platform then, spat on his hands, and dropped his maul on the top of the pipe. The point down in the bottom of the hole that had been dug the depth of a spade handle, sank deeper into the hard yellow clay. Then another man climbed up and the two swung their mauls powerfully. They were spelled by eager men, who in turn tired and were followed by others all through the waning afternoon and into the cooler night.

Faint dawn was graying the sky when Obadiah again climbed to his platform. He'd sent his last two tired volunteers home. In an hour, rested men would return.

Obadiah had a sense of foreboding, although the well was approaching the forty-foot depth where he expected to strike water.

He wondered where Nason and his gun-swift were. The big nester had disappeared immediately after Obadiah announced his intention of driving a well and hadn't been seen since. He'd expected the fellow to throw obstacles in his way, try to dishearten the homesteaders, do something to slow him up.

NOW IT was too late. In another few hours, maybe sooner, the pipe would gush water.

But was it too late? It was a dark night, and Obadiah was alone. If the two jumped him with iron in their fists—

They were as ruthless as a pair of wolves. He felt a shiver of apprehension and wished he hadn't sent all the men home. Then he was ashamed. The Lord would side him.

In the distance he heard the clink of a pony's hoof stumbling against a flint. Obadiah slid down from the platform and brought the holster of his long-barreled Colt further forward on his lean thigh. He wasn't one to put all the work on Him. He had the weak and helpless to look after—like that fool nester who'd dug thirty feet and quit, to let his kids lug water from the branch.

Obadiah crouched behind the platform. The pony came closer. But no friendly hail floated out of the dark. The rider was acting mighty suspicious.

Obadiah's .45 cleared leather and he challenged: "Halt or I'll shoot!"

He was taking no chances. That well was going to be finished.

"Don't shoot, Jonesy!" a voice called. "It's me . . . Soapy Stone. Heard you were alone.

So I came down to sit with you till daylight. Wouldn't want no dry-gulcher slipping up on you."

A surge of relief floated over Obadiah. It was sure thoughtful of Soapy to ride down.

Then red and orange muzzle blooms were stabbing through the gray gloom as fast-triggered sixguns roared behind Obadiah.

He felt splinters kicked in his lean cheek from the platform post as he hunted the ground and swung his long body behind the wooden shelter.

Soapy's pony screamed in death-struck agony. Obadiah heard it smash to the ground, but he didn't hear even a groan from his friend's lips. He guessed the stumpy fat man was a gone gosling.

Obadiah burned powder sparingly. He only had the five loaded shells in his cylinder, having used one to end the cow's suffering. But he loosed a couple to let the rannies know he was in the game.

He didn't want to down them unless he had to, to save his own life and protect the well. Help would come at daylight. He could hold them off until then, he figured.

He had no lingering doubt as to who his early visitors were after the first echoes came clapping back from the near hills and the gun-talk quieted.

He could hear Nason cursing, "We didn't get the blasted, red-headed son, Scarface! Now those nesters will be down on us like a swarm of bees. What are we going to do?"

"You tell me, Nason," sneered Scarface.

"We'll separate," Nason explained. "Come in from opposite directions fast with guns hammering."

(Continued on page 128)

Triple Fiction-Treat for February!

1. PRAIRIE PIRATES OF THE BIG MUDDY!

By Norman A. Fox

Adventure aboard a hell-bound Missouri riverboat!

2. GUN-GUARDS FOR THE DEVIL'S DRIFT-FENCE

By Joseph Chadwick

Ranch warfare in the midst of the devil's own blizzard!

3. THE COFFIN-FILLER'S SYNDICATE

By Barry Cord

Gunplay in the City of Missing Men!



15. **Ace-High**
WESTERN
STORIES

ALSO, DRY WELLS REBELS, a complete novelette by D. B. Newton, and a smashing trio of short stories by Giff Cheshire, Sebastian Brand and Kenneth L. Sinclair. . . All in the big new February issue, which goes on sale December 27!

*Gunsmoke Epic of a Lawman who Tallied
Himself as King of Hell!*

By TOM ROAN



Gun-thunder rocked the streets of that little cowtown as Crazy Boners, Hatfields, and Rafter Arrow men sent red hell hurtling around the ears of Highlander and Drinkwater men. . . . Until a bunch of kill-hungry renegades caused those feuding cowmen to unite their guns in one grim purpose: Death to every shoot-in-the-back son who belonged to the Buckskin River Cattle Pool!

Chapter I

WAR COMES TO BUCKSKIN RIVER

WAR COMES TO BUCKSKIN RIVER

But after all, he reckoned, there were some things that were not made to be stopped by any sheriff. Buckskin River was getting set to blow itself all to hell, and no one man was going to prevent it—not the spilling of blood, anyway.

Most of these people were his friends in one way or another, and yet they were all killers when aroused, some sneaky mean, apt to drop a man from behind a rock, others ready to charge head on like a grizzly at the drop of a hat. Many had greeted him in the same old way, grasping his hand and slapping him on the back, their women and children ganging up around him. Others had been sullen. Sometimes he had had to stand and swallow an old-fashioned cussin' out. A man could not

knock another man's jaw off with the fellow's wife standing right behind him.

But it had been no good, not one bit of it. When the people in this Skyland Range Country wanted to fight, all hell was not going to hold them, even if a sheriff they were supposed to listen to rode himself into a sheath of corns and saddle blisters from his tailbone clear to the backs of his ears.

Right at the moment Buckskin River was so quiet he could hear his old gold chime watch ticking in the lower right-hand pocket of his vest, and even the river seemed to be holding off in its constant rumbling in its rocky gorge. Maybe the river knew it—and most certainly the dogs knew, in that uncanny way of the brutes, that this ungodly peace and quiet could not last. Every last one of them had deserted the doorways down the street.

It was in the restlessness of little black Boots trying to sleep under the chair. Every now and then she lifted her head with one of those queer starts and looked up to make sure he was there. Boots knew! Boots could always guess ahead of time when guns were going to blaze, when the doors were going to bang, half of them in town already closed, and when horses would snort and men would yell and curse, with all of Buckskin River thrown into a sudden uproar!

After it was over there would be women crying and children wailing in several places in these wild Montana hills, valleys and mile-deep canyons. It seemed that the women and kids always caught it, always had to shoulder the load and the hurt. Man, the damned fool, just got himself killed, just got shot, pitched over and died, and that was all there was to it, no pain, no sorrow. He left that part to his widow.

It was Saturday, always the worst day, with trouble brewing in the cow country and already gone beyond words in a dozen places. The Allan gang had come galloping in, pounding down off Storm Divide, the great range to northward. Swinging past the jailhouse, so close their right stirrups had almost touched the end of the porch, they had thundered on down to the hitchrack in front of the Queen of Hearts, a few doors above the bank.

HELLFIRE Buck Allan himself had been at the head of the eleven well-armed cowboys. A long and lean old devil in black on an iron-gray, Buck was not the kind to fool a fellow. He had come in with a Winchester slung by his saddle and a Peacemaker at either hip.

Allan had looked neither to the right nor left, keeping his hard black eyes straight ahead, the lean, close-shaven face long and grim despite an over-smearing of white from his wife's flour barrel. Only a couple of his riders out of

the wild and woolly lot had bothered to glance in on the porch. The two that had glanced in had that sullen, what-yuh-gonna-do-about-it look in their eyes.

Now dust was soaring up in a wild cloud and crawling high against the bushy cottonwoods on the old stage trail to Crazy Creek, the little railroad town forty miles away. That dust meant the Drinkwater crowd, probably led by Old Luke. Sam Easy even hoped that it would be Old Luke, short, ruddy-faced and gray-mustached. Anybody but Cockeyed Ike, Luke's crazy son!

Luke was smooth, usually cool. Sometimes a man could make him see a point without having to wrap the barrel of a Frontier .45 around his head, even when he was three sheets to the wind on Rocky Mountain Honey, the meanest, rawest whiskey an 'umcarin' cuss could pour into his guts in the Saddle Rope & Spur, almost straight across the street from the Queen of Hearts—and both tougher than whang-leather of late.

Cockeyed Ike had little enough sense when sober, and nary a whit when coked to the eyes.

When the Drinkwater bunch came into sight Sam Easy's eyes narrowed and his long face tightened.

Luke was there, all right, pounding along on his tall white Rattle-bone, but Cockeyed Ike was there also, mounted on a splendid black and dressed up like some fancy Spanish dancer, his expensive guns bristling, big Mexican saddle all aglitter with silver trappings.

"Which means Luke's drunk, leastwise nearly popped, anyhow." The sheriff's voice appeared to come through his nose, pale eyes drawing into thin pin-points. The little dog under the chair got up to go inside the dingy jail office. "He promised fair an' square to keep Ike outa town if I wouldn't look 'im up last week, an' he ain't never a hand to lie unless he's been suckin' at a bottle."

But it really mattered little, after all. Cockeyed Ike was deep—all the way to the ears—in this quarrel that was bringing Buckskin River into war. It had been Ike who had gone back east last fall with close to a trainload of young beef cattle. It had been past Christmas before he had returned, needing a shave and a haircut, his fancy pockets empty, a beaten-dog look in his long dark face. Busted flatter'n hell, everybody knew, after seeing Kansas City's highlights!

Soon after Ike's return, people had started to know Mr. Julian Brady and Mr. Horth Shell, two dark, strong and thick-set men in hard hats, both fond of black cigars half as long and big as a calf's leg. Brady and Shell had turned up within two weeks after Cockeyed Ike's return, and had taken rooms in the Owl Head Hotel.

It was then that the big talk of the cattle pool had started.

Buzzard-faced old Rice Grant, down at the bank, had soon joined the idea, whole soul and body, with Roosh Hendry of the Saddle Rope & Spur pitching in. Then Judge Seth Scully, Gage Lantry, and about a dozen others, including Cockeyed Ike who had dragged in Old Luke, and finally the entire south side of the country had gone in.

Robbed of Cockeyed Ike, the scheme might have taken fire all the way to beyond Storm Divide. All a cowman had to do was to pool his cattle with the rest of the cowmen in the country and ship them to Brady & Shell, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri, and Brady & Shell, Inc., would do the selling, getting the tip-top prices right there on the ground. Then Brady & Shell, Inc., would send everybody a check—and everybody would be rich, well and happy!

"But there was one thing what jarred me," Buck Allan had complained. "One of them damn' fools, right about when he had me sold on the idea, had guts enough to ax how many offspring I expected from my steers next comin' spring, an' then an' there, I blowed higher'n hell's low. Only Washington, itself, could send out a fella who wouldn't know that there ain't been a man in the world who's ever even heard of a steer havin' a calf!

"Not only that," he had raged on. "When they saw I was mad, it was hinted that a lot of bad things might happen to my Rafter Arrow stuff if I didn't jine up. Hell, it was even hinted that some mad cowman might take a shot at my wife or daughter—an' that's why I'm comin' out to fight, hoof an' nail!"

Nor was Buck Allan going to have to wait long. The Drinkwater crowd was already hitting the foot of the street, the hoofs of sixteen horses a clatter fierce enough to awaken the dead; and up there in the bank old buzzard-faced Rice Grant and his close-knit crowd—including Mr. Brady and Mr. Shell—probably had the door of the vault open and were ready to jump inside and yank the door closed behind them at the first crack of a gun.

But Sam Easy still waited, every nerve calm. As if just to prove it to himself, and he really had no thought of proving anything, he took out the makings and started rolling a smoke. His hands and fingers were like iron, no hint of a quiver, not a crumb of tobacco wasted.

No crazy, cattle-pool war was going to jar Sam Easy, especially when it was started by Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater and a couple of tin-horn slickers who did not have sense enough to know a steer from a cow!

AS USUAL, it was the big-mouthed Cockeyed Ike who started the ball rolling. Seeing Rafter Arrow horses at the hitchrack in front of the Queen of Hearts, he was yelling

like a maniac many rods before the Drinkwater crowd charged up to the Saddle Rope & Spur's long, oak-log rack.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah for the cattle pool!"

Old Luke and a couple of big cowpunchers had dragged him out of the saddle and on inside. For fifteen or twenty minutes they had kept him there, evidently watching him, and then he was back, wilder than ever, both hands cupped to his mouth, howling toward the Queen of Hearts.

"Hurrah for the cattle pool! Damn the dirty, cowardly hold-outs! We'll kill their lousy women and kids! We'll shoot 'em where we find 'em walking or riding a trail! Come out, damn you, and fight like men! We know you're hiding over there!"

"Ike! Ike!" Old Luke had come popping back outside, the red swinging doors flapping behind him. "Shut yore damn' mouth 'fore I knock yuh down an' stomp yore brains out. Wait for the Highlander boys! They'll be here just any time!"

"To hell with waitin' for anybody!" Cockeyed Ike gave his father a one-sided push, so hard that it sent the old man stumbling and wheeling to fall to his hands and knees in the deep dust around the hitchrack. "I'm a fighting man! I cover all the ground I stand on, and I can whip any two men who ever stood on feet!"

"But—but, Ike, Ike!" The old man came up, still trying to stop him, hat gone, face like chalk, knowing that he was dealing with a crazy man. "I told yuh to wait! Wait, yuh damn' fool, an' give them Highlander boys a chance to get here!"

"Come out and fight, I'm telling you!" Nothing was going to stop Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater. Still howling like a maniac, he knocked the old man down, this time with a wild blow to the jaw that sent Luke pitching face-first into the dust. Ike was just drunk enough now not to be afraid of the devil, drunk enough to dare the very heavens down to fight him. "Come on out, you dirty Rafter Arrows! Take the call of a fighting man!"

* * *

"Wait, Buck, wait!" Over in the Queen of Hearts they were having a time holding Hell-fire Buck Allan. Wayne Rider, a short, thick-set bronc buster, had had sense enough to jump ahead of the old man and close the heavy oak front doors. "Give them what they want! Let the Highlanders come! Let the street fill up with 'em, an' then we'll open up!"

"But he thinks," yelled the old man, "that we're scared of 'im!"

"Let 'im think it, Buck!" Little, squint-eyed Charley Drew, as deadly as a rattlesnake when once started, was siding with Rider now. "Maybe it will be the best play we can make!"

"Heap of sense to that, Hellfire."

The voice behind them was so calm it was like a sudden shot itself. They turned, eyes popping as they stared at the tall, loose-jointed figure of the sheriff of Buckskin River standing there, the muzzle of a pumpgun covering them all, even to fat and bald-headed old Moss Hatcher who had come out from behind the bar in all the excitement.

"I wouldn't move, ary one of yuh," the sheriff was going on, before they could recover from their surprise. "Just reach for the ceilin' an' keep yore paws there. This thing's got a trigger slicker'n a greased hog on it, an' buck-shot's kinda bad for the belly."

"Me, now," he told them, "I know all yuh jokers, wives an' daughters, sons an' sweet-hearts, an' I know most ever-body else in these parts. I think I'm kinda outmartin' Cockeyed Ike. Moss," he cut a quick glance at the bartender, "yuh open that hole in the floor there at the head of the bar. Yore cellar's gonna have company. Easy!" He wriggled the shotgun as a cowboy's hand started to drop. "Once I let go with this thing the whole push of yuh are apt to start fallin' dead in yore tracks. Move, Moss!"

They cursed him with every profanity they could bring to tongue, and it looked as if they would go for their guns a dozen times, but once old man Hatcher had opened the trapdoor at the head of the bar he was driving them down the narrow stairs. When the last man was down, still cursing him, still threatening, Sam Easy gave another order.

"Roll up a couple of them barrels of whiskey an' set 'em on that door. I'm kinda takin' over the Queen of Hearts for a spell, Moss."

"They—they'll kill me if I help yuh, Sam!" Moss whined.

"Yo've done been helpin' me!" snapped the sheriff. "Do I have to wrop about half this scatter-gun 'round yore shinin' moon head to let yuh know yo're goin' to go right on helpin' me?"

The barrels of whiskey were rolled forward then and placed on the door, Moss Hatcher cursing and whimpering all through it, saying over and over that he was signing his own death warrant.

"Which is a lie, Moss." Sam Easy was finally grinning at him. "I'm the same fella what told them to get into that hole, an' they got. Yuh ask 'em why they got if they say anything to yuh. Now hit 'er for the back door. I said I was takin' over the Queen of Hearts for a spell, an' I ain't never been a man to fool yuh."

A minute later, the bartender gone and the heavy rear doors barred, he turned, walking toward the front of the room, the raging of Cockeyed Ike still filling the town from the east side of the street.

"KEEP back inside, boys, keep back!" Old Luke Drinkwater was managing the men behind him, but Ike was still too much for him. "He won't cross the street unless he knows yo're right at his heels! Ike's a plain damn coward when yuh come right down to—Uh!"

"Shut that talk!" Cockeyed Ike had struck out again, a blow this time that caught the old man on the point of the chin and sent him flopping back into the dust. "I'm a fighter! I'm blue hell! Come out damn you!" He was shaking his fists and dancing crazily now. "Don't hide behind your closed doors! Come out and answer the call of a fighting man!"

"I reckon I'm callin', Ike."

The voice was again so calm it was startling. The front doors of the Queen of Hearts had opened. A swing of the bat-wings had let Sam Easy step forward, shotgun in the crook of his arm, old hat slanted low on his forehead to shield those pale eyes, and unlit cigarette drooping from the right side of his mouth.

"If yuh wanta die fast an' hard, then yuh can start sawin' for yore shootin' tools, Ike."

"You?" Old Luke was up on his hands and knees.

"Yup, it's me, Luke." The sheriff was coming on steadily. "This old thing's kinda tricky." He covered them with the shotgun now without increasing his pace. "Goes off sometimes when I just look at it."

"Steady, Ike, steady." A strange, whisper-like whimper had come into Old Luke Drinkwater's tone. "This damn' fool will kill yuh."

"Ike knows it, Luke." The sheriff had reached the middle of the street. "Start reachin' for the place where the angels fly, bad fella. I'm sorter mad this mornin', an' when I get mad I'm meaner'n hell an' don't care who I kill. Yore daddy's said a thousan' times yo're a plain coward. Yo're that an' a heap more, yuh long, hungry-lookin' snake! Why'n hell don't yuh go for yore guns? Show a man how bad yuh really are!"

"Don't goad 'im, Sam!" half-wept old Luke, on his feet again, his hands lifting. "Yuh shorely ain't just lookin' for an excuse to kill my son, yuh damned fool!"

"I aim to take yuh both to jail, that's all." Sam Easy had stopped ten feet away. "Either to jail or send yuh six feet under in the cold clay. If Ike makes one funny move I'll blow that fancy shirt bosom right on back through his belly just to hear 'im clatter an' fall apart. It goes for yuh both, just like sayin' 'Howdy, Mister Smith,' if any of yore bunch in the saloon behind yuh decide to take a shot at us while we're goin' up the street."

"Now," he waved the shotgun, "get the hell agoin'!"

"But—but," Old Luke was finding his voice

again, "yuh can't do this to us, Sam! Why—why, Sam, I voted for yuh! Last fall was for the third term, an'—an' I helped the first one when yuh wasn't much more'n a slick-faced yearlin'!"

"The jailhouse," said the sheriff, "is up the street, right yonder on the rise. Grab that jackass yuh call Ike by the arm, the pants, or where it's best to take holt of a skunk like 'im, an' start. Once more I warn yuh: If any of yore monkeys in that joint behind yuh take a shot at us, then I'll kill yuh both. Now get goin'!"

"Better do what he tells us, Ike." The old cowman gave his son a pull. "This crazy fool has horns when—when he starts to fight."

Chapter II

GUNTRAP

PEOPLE who dared to peep from windows and cracked doors had never seen anything like it. Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater and his father were actually going to jail. In the ugly hush that had gripped the town the sheriff was right behind them, the muzzle of his shotgun covering them, the dust of the street muffling the fall of their footsteps for a long time before the old man and his son started cursing. Oddly enough it was the pale Cockeyed Ike, stumbling and kicking at the dust as if lifting a cloud to hide them, who made the fewest threats.

"An' now," ordered the sheriff when they were inside the office of the jail, "I sorter think it time to unbuckle yore hardware an' let it drop. Watch yore hands!" He gave the door a kick behind him that sent it slamming closed. "I may not stop this thing; I may not do but a mite of good, even none at all, but I'm still the sheriff of Buckskin River an' gonna be that as long as I wear yore badge."

"We'll make bond, Sam." Old Luke was trying to be calm now. "Yuh just name the figger an' I'll sign 'er."

"What in hell have we done," snarled the big Ike, "to make a bond for! He hasn't got anything on us!"

"Only the muzzle of a slide-trombone shotgun, Ike." Sam Easy answered him, watching the older man even more closely than his son. "Just do as you're told. I ain't takin' no bond today."

"But we'll get out!" Old Luke started to snarl. "Seth Scully will see to that!"

"If," nodded the sheriff, "he ain't soon locked up back there with yuh, Luke. Better let them belts drop. All yuh can ever get outa yore thoughts of makin' a fast play on me is a gut-full of buckshot."

"Yuh dirty dog!" Old Luke let his belts

drop. "But we're gonna get outa here soon, Sam. We'll get out, an' then, Sam Easy, we'll lay yuh so low in the ground the worms won't find yuh! You're takin' sides with the Allan gang. Knowed all along yuh would do it. Yo'd double-cross yore own mother!"

"All right, Ike!" Easy prodded the younger Drinkwater with the muzzle of the shotgun. "Let 'em drop—an' get on inside. I ain't got all day to stand an' fool with a couple of monkeys like yuh, not when there's so many more to be fetched in. Besides," he half grinned, "I've got a little date with the Highlander fellas. As we stepped on the jailhouse porch I saw dust risin' in the southwest."

"There! There!" yelled Old Luke, wheeling on his son in a fury and shoving a knotty fist under his nose. "I told yuh, yuh long-legged damn fool! Told yuh to wait!"

"Get on inside if you're going to let Sam Easy do this to us!" Cockeyed Ike gave him a push. "I thought you had pull and standing in this town. It looks like you're just another come-along to this big hick behind me with that shotgun in my back. Move!"

Then Cockeyed Ike shoved his father on inside, saving the sheriff the trouble. Sam Easy herded them on to the last cell on his left. Leaving them there, locked inside, Old Luke cursing, and swearing that he had mashed his best trigger finger when he closed the door on them, he was back in the office, the front corridor door also closed and locked, when another wild hammering of hoofs hit the lower end of the street.

Not wanting to carry the heavy jail keys around in his pocket, he stood for a moment glancing to the right and left, first at the big old iron safe in one corner of the room, then at his spur-tracked desk in another corner. He was lifting the leg of his trousers, hanging the keys half in and half out of his boot when all hell suddenly broke out down the street.

Guns were barking and crashing now, startling him for a moment when he looked through a window and saw one blaze of fire after another coming from the front of the Queen of Hearts and answering volleys beginning to pour from the Saddle Rope & Spur. Horsemen in the lower end of the street were fanning out.

"It means," he told himself with a growl, "that the Allan gang's busted outa the cellar or old Moss sneaked back somehow an' let 'em out. An' now," his eyes were on those scattering horsemen, "I've got the Highlanders on me to boot!"

He turned then to the tall gun-locker on the wall. Opening it he started taking down old-fashioned muzzle-loaders. As he stood the first two weapons on the floor, the wall appeared suddenly to spring into an ugly black cloud in front of him, and he went down,

loosely, the blood flying, the noise of a shot from the east window of the office only a faint, thundering sound in his ears.

A moment later, a short, bulky man in boots and chaps heaved himself through the window. Six-shooter in hand, cocked and ready for another shot, he moved swiftly to the sheriff's side. In a matter of seconds he had pulled up the sheriff's trouser leg and had the keys. Backing now to the corridor door, he unlocked it, watching everything, waiting as if listening for something. Then he swung the door open and cautiously peered inside, dark eyes so beady and bright they might have been rare jewels set in the low-browed skull.

"Luke?" He called whisperingly. "Ike?"

"Huh?" Old Luke answered. "Who'n hell is it?"

And what the dickens," snarled the nasty-tempered Ike, "do you want, calling us?"

"Alone back there?"

"That's right!" snapped back Cockeyed Ike. "Again I'm asking what you want!—I—I Well, by golly, Pa, it's Sneaky Pete Pardeau!"

"Damned if it ain't!" said the older man. "Sneaky Pete!"

LOCKED down in an evil-smelling cellar where rats as large as tomcats played tag with each other, was no place for Hellfire Buck Allan. The place was stone-walled and windowless, rarely used since a store room in the rear had been set up against the wall as a lean-to. In the damp darkness they had to curse out heaven and earth before a cowboy with a match found an old lantern. By the light of that they had found a rusty axe, and had started to work.

Sam Easy had not bothered to take their weapons, and when prying with the axe failed to part the hinges of the trapdoor. Hellfire Buck tried to shoot them off. Failing in that, he had snatched the axe, and with a cowboy holding the lantern, had started chopping away at the timber holding the door. Finally the timber had parted, letting the door and the barrels of whiskey come tumbling down, almost on top of them.

"An' now," the old man had grinned, hooking the balls of perspiration from his forehead with a crooked forefinger, "up an' to hell outa here we go. Stand back, Shorty! It's me what takes the lead. Sam Easy might still be up there waitin' on us, though I think I heard 'im go on out the front door. If he's still up there, I'm good as dead, or he's good as dead when I hit top-air."

And up they had come, one after another into the shadowy room. Not yet had they had time to know exactly what had happened, but they saw no sign of Easy, no sign of the crowing Cockeyed Ike or his daddy. But they had seen Drinkwater men, and it had been

Hellfire Buck who had stuck his head out over the winged doors to yell.

"All right, damn yuh, let's go to town!"

And then the war had started, guns flashing, men inside the Queen of Hearts hugging the sides of the doorway and the windows at either side of it, the answering shots tearing at them from across the street.

Horses at the hitchracks at either side of the street had lunged backward. A few of them had been tied by their halter shanks. The rest had only their reins pitched across them, cowboy fashion. The street was soon filled with them, those tied to the racks tearing them down, the others simply wheeling. As they started down the street those with the halter shanks still fastened followed them, dragging the racks along with them and making the dust boil in mountainous clouds.

Now, dodging the stampeding horses, the Highlanders were coming into the fight, led by Fuzzy Frank Swindell, as big as a house, his hair and great mattress of a beard flying. He swung his tall bay to the right when he saw the running horses, sending streaks of fire and gunsmoke ahead of him as he realized they were about to plunge straight into the middle of raging hell itself.

With Fuzzy Frank—a one-time Southwest outlaw if all reports were true—to lead them, the Highlanders were tougher, quicker to kill than the Drinkwaters. They were all hard drinkers, hard riders, devil-may-care hellions. Each time they came to town on a spree, two or three of them had to be thrown in jail. Seeing them coming, Hellfire Buck ripped out an order.

"Four of yuh fellas, Dink, Bud, Crow an' Pat, hit that ladder agin the wall at the other end of the bar an' up through that lid to the roof. Chaney an' Tubby will watch the back way. We ain't gettin' caught in no fool mess agin like Sam Easy caught us. No, by Gawd! An'," he added hastily, "we ain't fallin' in no trap if we can help it."

"Wonder where them Crazy Bones fellas are?" a little, cross-eyed, red-headed and buck-toothed cowboy by the name of Jimmy Rivers was asking when a bullet from across the street sent him away from the doorway to start wrapping a soiled handkerchief around a wound on his right wrist. "They oughta be here!"

"They'll come, give 'em time." There was a hint of doubt in Hellfire Buck Allan's tone at that moment, for he had just seen squint-eyed little Charley Drew stagger back from the window at the head of the bar with a foolish smile, a streak of blood appearing at each side of his mouth. "Judd Clark's wife was late with breakfast agin, I guess. I'd take a latigo to her, I swear. What's the matter, Charley?"

But Charley Drew had no answer for him. He was going down, and he had staggered into a direct line with the doorway. Before old Hellfire Buck could reach him and drag him out of the way, a hail of bullets poured through the opening, a dozen of them catching the little man in the back, pitching him forward on his face.

It seemed less than a second later before another man was down at the opposite window, a young fellow named Dawson who had been with the Rafter Arrow less than six months. As Dawson lurched back, one hand still clawed to the casing of the window, shots started drumming from the roof as the four men up there opened fire on others on roofs across the street, in a deadly fury.

"Looks kinda bad." Allan sent a burst of shots across the street, shooting at a window in the Saddle Rope & Spur. "Sorta wonderin' why them Crazy Boners ain't here, myself."

"Listen!" Wayne Rider's ears seemed a trifle sharper than any of the others. "I hear somebody comin'—from the north!"

"Could be the Hatfield boys," grunted Allan, reloading a long, black Colt, "though they didn't expect to make it till somewhere right 'round noon. Might be the Crazy Boners—Nope, I know that damned rebel yell!" His old eyes suddenly brightened. "That's the Hatfields—Green, Wince an' Spark!"

It was clear then that somebody had come. From up the street, sounding as if it were from the jailhouse itself, came the sounds of men yelling and squawling as though going through some drunken Indian dance.

Buckskin River was like a ship tossing in a storm, sadly heeled over, and then, suddenly, beginning to right itself. Hellfire Buck Allan would never have admitted it at the time, but the Rafter Arrows were on the losing side of the game, outnumbered at the start. But the coming of the Highlanders made it far more than a two-to-one proposition.

Those Highlanders knew how to fight. Their splitting in the middle of the street was no accident. Half had gone to the east side, half to the west. Some of those on the west side had immediately moved into position where they could cover the rear door and windows of the Queen of Hearts, after taking up positions behind trees and rocks, and the rest had headed for the roofs.

Across the street, once Fuzzy Frank Swindell was in the war, the north end of the street and the west side had been cut off. Swindell had sent men almost as far as the jail, having them keep behind houses and stores, and then had them rush across, passing right in front of the silent jail. Thus the trap had been formed, the jaws of it slowly closing in. Now all that was being changed. Highlanders and Drinkwaters were being caught in

the same kind of a trap that they had laid.

"The Crazy Boners are in 'er now!" yelled Allan as the firing grew louder and louder, yells, curses and excited poundings coming with it. "Hear the music of them guns! Come on, boys!" He started for the front door in a wild jump. "Let's go out an' finish bustin' 'em down! We've won 'er!"

"Hold it!" Wayne Rider had sense enough to grab him by the arm and yank him back as another rain of bullets poured through the doorway. "We ain't that foolish! Don't get killed just because the fight's only about over!"

"But it is over!" roared the cowman. "They're licked! Listen to 'em howlin' for horses! Listen to 'em runnin' an' scramblin', ever'body tryin' his damndest to get away!"

"They're licked for now, not forever." Wayne Rider was not one to lose his head over anything; he was certainly not going to dash outside just to get killed. "They're fightin' men, an' a fightin' man always has one more kick left. Keep back from that door!"

Chapter III

LAST LAUGH FOR A DEAD MAN

DRUNK on the complete victory—at least for the day—that had come to them, it was the wildest mob Buckskin River had ever seen. Six-shooters still roared, but most of them were fired in the air. Allan riders, Crazy Boners and Hatfielders grabbed each other and danced in the street. It seemed that not a Drinkwater man or a Highlander who could ride, walk or crawl had been left in town. Most of them had made their get-away riding double on half-flying horses heading back down the valley.

Left to its fate, the Saddle Rope & Spur suffered. Bottles and glasses were shot off the back bar; the stove was overturned in the center of the floor; the front bar was hauled over with a crash. Had Roosh Hendry been on hand he might have suffered, but he had deserted everything, even the money-drawer, and had gone galloping home to take shelter behind the skirts of his wife and children.

"An' now I wanta see Sam Easy!" howled Hellfire Buck Allan. "The ornery son mighta thought that he was doin' the right thing, but he was supposed to be my friend."

"Eats Sunday dinner at my house ever' chance he gets," growled the tall, slow-spoken Green Hatfield. "Folks know, o' course, that he's been sparkin' my Mattie Martha, only that ain't gonna make no difference now. Back where I come from a man who once turns agin yuh is allus agin yuh. Let's go see Sam Easy."

"The jailhouse," put in the equally tall and slow-spoken Wince Hatfield, "looked as quiet

when we passed as a good McCoy back home—an' there ain't no good McCoy unless he's a dead McCoy."

"True as the Lord's prayer!" nodded Spark, the undersized one of the Hatfield lot. "We'll go see Sam."

But somebody had another notion on the spur of the moment. They headed for the bank. After Hellfire Buck had kicked on the front doors and threatened to tear them down, they were opened by tall, timid old Marsh Nicholson, the cashier. Marsh was slammed back behind one door, and the gang barged in, turning to their left and were soon in the rear office where long, pale-faced and gray-bearded Rice Grant was sitting. Beside him, to his left, sat Judge Seth Scully, red of face, his tobacco-stained goatee and drooping mustaches quivering.

The third man sat in a corner beyond the desk, and everybody recognized him at once as Mr. Pete Pardeau, a stranger who had come to Bucks River a week or two after Julian Brady and Horth Shell. About all anybody knew about him was that he had taken a room down at the Owl Head Hotel and had developed a sudden taking to boots and chaps, big hats and long-shanked spurs, the latter tripping him several times when he first tried to strut the street in them. What connection—if any—he had in the forming of the cattle pool was unknown.

"Where're those fellas Brady an' Shell?" Hellfire Buck asked. "Yuh got 'em locked up in the bank, Rice?"

"Why—why, no, Buck. No!" Grant started to rise, changed his mind after a glance at Judge Scully, and slumped back. "You—you fellows must have scared them out of town." He tried to laugh, making a sound like the croaking of a small frog. "I might have gone myself, had I known a fine hole to run for!"

"The same here!" Scully's laugh was better, he being more of the politician. "Haven't seen anything like it, Buck, since you and your boys whipped the outlaw gang at the head of Snake Creek. By George—"

"Yuh wasn't there to see nothin', Seth!" Allan glowered. "What's that punk," he jabbed a thumb backward at Pardeau, "doin' here? Don't tell me he's gonna furnish the water for yore cow pool!"

"Mr. Pardeau," Rice Grant rose slowly, cautiously, "isn't interested in cattle pools, Buck. He's interested in—er—minerals. Gold deposits, silver and such."

"Oh, he is!" Allan shoved back his old hat and vigorously scratched his head. "Well, I'll tell yuh now," he turned and glowered at Pardeau, "don't let me catch yuh diggin' holes on Rafter Arrow range, Mr. Pildew. I don't like holes. Rice," he swung back to the bank-

er, "yuh still interested in the cow pool?"

"Only—only," the banker's long buzzard face paled, "in an' so far as it will be good for the country. I investigated Mr. Brady and Mr. Shell, and I found them—"

"With a most excellent background, Buck!" hastily put in the judge. "I, too, am only interested in the welfare of my people, these good souls who have honored me—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped the old cowman. "Dammit, Seth, yuh even get up to spout for votes at a funeral. Ain't no place yuh squirts will stop, no boot yuh won't lick."

He cursed them out after that, threatening to take them outside and have them hauled across a hitchrack to be horse-whipped. Green Hatfield finally talked him out of it.

"A man," growled Hatfield, "is supposed to be able to think what he wants to think in this country. Maybe these two damn fools have just been taken in, line an' sinker. I didn't see no gunfire comin' from the bank, otherwise I'd say hang hell outa both of 'em."

"But I'm warning yuh, Rice. Watch yoreself!" He leaned over the desk, pointing a finger under the banker's nose. "It's war now. Most of us keep our money in other banks so yuh can't handle it. But yuh be careful. Damn careful!"

"An' that goes for yuh, hawg-fat!" His hand moved quickly to the judge's red face, giving the man's nose a little twist. "Yuh fined me once for callin' yuh a plain whiskey-gut in yore court—an' I've still got that in my craw. Let's go see Sam, boys."

Then, apparently accomplishing nothing at all, Green Hatfield led the way out and over to the jail, a great swarm following him. When he kicked open the door to the office he stood back, mouth sagging open, a chew of tobacco falling from his jaw.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he grunted. "Whut—whut'n hell yuh doin' in the jailhouse with that polecat, Mattie Martha!"

"Sam Easy has been shot," a tall, dark-haired girl with wide, frank gray eyes answered him. "Ike Drinkwater's back there in a cell, shot through the eyes. I followed you in, Daddy, knowing what you were up to, but it was over before I could get here, so I stopped at the jail—"

"Hold, now!" Green Hatfield threw up a long, lean hand. "What'n hell was yuh sayin' 'bout Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater? Did it hurt im?"

"It ruined him," answered the girl, calmly going back to work over the sheriff sprawled in a chair. "Sam has a bad scalp wound."

"Ruined 'im?" Hatfield and all who could follow had poured back into the corridor of the jail a couple of seconds later. No, it wrecked 'im! Ain't he a purty sight lyin' there with his arm flung around that chair in the corner,

buckteeth a-shinin' through the blood!" He laughed shortly. "By golly, looks just like he was a-grinnin' at us!"

"His daddy oughta be with 'im." A man who had taken no part in the fight had shoved open the rear door where the keys still hung in the lock, and had stepped inside. "Sam Easy had both of 'em on the end of a shotgun when I saw 'im marchin' 'em up the street."

"Then where's Old Luke now?" Allan wanted to know. "Look in all them cells, fellas, under the bunks an' ever'-where! He might even be clingin' to a ceilin' like a fly!"

"I looked in all them cells." Hatfield was still staring at the dead man on the floor, sprawled down between the lower iron bunk and the corner, the face a mass of blood, only his huge teeth showing through. "Ain't no-body else here."

"But look at this thing!" Green Hatfield laughed, a wicked, all-jarring splatter of contempt. Some of the men in the corridor had dragged off their hats. Now they put them back on, grinning mirthlessly. "I ain't never seen nothin' so much like a grinnin' possum in my life—unless it was a possum. Let's go back to Sam Easy."

WITH CONSCIOUSNESS so completely blotted out of him that he was yet unable to define his right hand from his left, Sam Easy could not tell them anything. Mattie Martha had managed to get him off the floor and backed into a big chair. But the icy-cold water from the tap in the corner seemed to have no effect on him despite Mattie Martha Hatfield's constant dabbings.

"But he brought both Ol' Luke an' Cockeyed Ike to jail," insisted a townsman who had taken no part in the fight. "Ol' Luke wouldn't o' shot Ike. Hell, Ike's allus led 'im 'round by the nose, makin' him foot the bill for his fightin' scrapes."

Old Doc Chum was there with his little black bag before Easy really started taking stock of his surroundings. The lean old doctor placed his bag on the desk and sewed up the ugly tear in his scalp, then held a bottle of smelling salts under his nose for a full minute.

Then Sam Easy told them, scowling at himself, sparing himself not a thing, what had happened. He had started in like a house afire, he reckoned, and had come down like the rafters, accomplishing nothing. Sam Easy always told a straight tale, and there were few in the crowd to doubt him. Certainly there was no one brazen enough to say it.

"I had high aims," he wound up, "of jailin' Hellfire Buck an' Wayne Rider 'fore I was done, then tryin' to get my hands on Fuzzy Frank Swindell, an' that mighta held it down."

"But where was ol' Luke?"

"Right in the cell with Ike." He gazed

absent-mindedly at a window to his left. "Seems like I heard a shot or somethin' from there. Ain't even shore about that. Danged little certain of anything right now. I guess I was kinda foolish, though I didn't have time for much."

"Luke Drinkwater's still in town." One of the Crazy Boners had come pushing forward. He didn't leave with none of the others. I was up on a knoll southeast of the Saddle Rope, high enough to start pourin' lead on the roofs. I saw ever'body that left town, an' Luke Drinkwater, I tell yuh, wasn't nary one of 'em."

"An' he ain't among the kilt!" popped in another cowboy, this time one of the Hatfield riders. "Not unless it's a body what ain't yet been found, an' we've picked up four, plus three fellas what got shot an' have a fair chance of makin' more trouble."

"Onless," nodded Green Hatfield, "we hang 'em an' get it done. I had two haystacks set on fire, an' my new shed's burned to the ground right after midnight."

"But yuh ain't startin' no lynch law in my town, Green." Some of the cold glitter had come back into Sam Easy's eyes. "Not if I'm able to crawl to the gun-locker an' get me down my guns."

"And if Sam can't crawl," put in the girl, hotly, "I'll crawl for him! If you have to hang a man, hang a well one, not some crippled-up fool who let himself be talked into this thing!"

"Wimmin, as of yit," Buck Allan glared at her, "ain't been axed to set in judgment on this thing, young un. Me, now, I'd take me a good, stout latigo with a buckle on the end of it an' put yuh in yore place. I rule the roost at my house."

"Damned 'f yuh don't, Buck!" Green Hatfield was suddenly turning on him with a roar of laughter. "I passed the Rafter Arrow only last Fall, an' yore wife had yuh treed atop of the beam over the corral gate, an' all she had to tree yuh with was a buggy whip. That was right after that trip yuh had taken back to Kansas City or Saint Louis with a trainload of cows. Seems as how she'd found paid bills for 'round six hundred dollars in yore pockets for clothes yuh bought—"

"Shut up!" cut in Allan with a roar, his face suddenly white. "Yuh don't need to read a whole book about me."

"Don't aim to!" Hatfield was still laughing. "Wasn't that gal's name Daisy Mae or somethin' like that, Buck?"

"Thunderation, gimme room!" Allan had wheeled and was already pawing his way through the crowd and trying to get to the front door. "That fool ain't got a lick of sense!"

It was the jolt they needed—laughter. When men started laughing they could not think of

fighting. Yet they were soon currying the town again for old Luke Drinkwater, dead certain that he just had to be found somewhere, but there was no sign of him.

"An' all yore horses are in the stables out back, Sam," frowned Green Hatfield. "I looked myself. Whoever shot yuh—well, he went right on back an' killed Cockeyed Ike, then he musta taken Luke out the back way. Keys was there, in the door. Saw 'em myself."

"But why," Sam Easy was wanting to know, the pretty girl in a chair now beside him, "would they just want to kill Ike and take Luke away? Why didn't they kill them both and have it done?"

"Don't ax me, Sam." Hatfield took off his dusty hat and scratched his shaggy head. "I ain't supposed to be too smart in the first place, an' knowin' it I was never fool enough to let 'em run me for sheriff. Figgerin' this thing out is yore job. That's what they're payin' yuh for. I feel like takin' my bunch an' goin' home."

"You should have stayed there in the first place!" The girl was after him again. "You knew that coming to Hell River today could mean only one thing, and that one thing was blood!"

"Blood, yeah." Hatfield replaced his hat, carefully squaring it on his head. "They tell me a man's veins is filled with it—a real man's, that is, an' I had to come. My friends was a-comin'—"

"One banking on the other!"

"Yep, one bankin' on the other," nodded Hatfield, grimly. "That's the only way we could lick this country in the old days. We was all right as long as we stayed like that. It's these jokers comin' here to set up a cow pool what's got us so far apart of late nobody can get us back together. Sam," his voice rose, "ain't yuh got a bit of drinkin' whiskey 'round the jail?"

CREEPING footsteps on a rocky floor aroused old Luke Drinkwater shortly before midnight. Not that he knew the time. Time was of no importance any more. It seemed that he had been through hell over and over, and he knew that more hell was to come to him. He had seen his son murdered in jail, shot through the latticed steel door of the cell while down on his knees praying and begging, with the noise of the battle going on in Buckskin River loud enough to drown almost anything. Old Luke, himself, had been marched out right after that, a six-shooter covering him until his hands had been whipped behind him. A rusty pair of handcuffs from the wall of the jail office had locked his wrists behind him, then a gag had been placed in his mouth.

Sneaky Pete Pardeau had been as cold-blooded as hell about it, even chewing a little wad of gum all the time. Not until the gag and the handcuffs were in place had he given the old man any inkling of what was wanted of him, and yet old Luke Drinkwater and his headstrong son had been told what to expect if Ike kept running off at the mouth.

"We're taking a little walk, Drinkwater." Sneaky Pete had given the handcuffs a tug just to make sure they were tight. "Not far. Out the back door, then down that deep ditch you call a wash in this crazy country. It'll keep us hidden well enough until we get to the big bluffs above the river. There's a trail there. You may know about it. We're making a little detour that will take us right below the bank. A lot of fools in this town, I'm told, have forgotten that the bank was built over a big crack in the rocks that turns out to be a cave below the vault. In that spot we'll make further talk."

"And try anything tricky," Sneaky Pete had leered his little leer with that, "and I'll show you how quick you can die. You saw Big Mouth get it." Sneaky Pete had never called Ike anything else. "Big Mouth's had it coming for a long time. If the boss had listened to me in K. C. he would have got it back there when he couldn't pay up his gambling bills. Get along now and be quiet. Any noise means you'll be 'It' as we used to say when we were kids."

It was cold here on the floor now, cold and dark and damp where a four-inch pipe from the bank came down, to which the old man's feet had been fastened with a lock and chain. They were taking no chances on his getting away. Sneaky Pete Pardeau probably did not like the thought of a strong saddle rope around his neck, with one end made fast to some limb high over him.

Now Sneaky Pete was coming back to see him. Sneaky Pete always walked like somebody creeping, even when shuffling along at a fast pace. Old Luke could only wonder what he would want this time. Surely it was not just to stand and gloat. He had come for that three times, already, a shadow standing there with a lantern, the old man unable to say a word, even to cuss the livin' hell right out of 'im!

But this time, as the old man studied them, the footsteps did not belong to Sneaky Pete Pardeau. They came on, halting here and there as if their owner was not entirely certain of himself, and then they stumbled, a whispered oath close at hand now in the darkness.

Now as if caution was something that no longer mattered, a match was struck. In the flare of light, Luke Drinkwater blinked, lying there looking up at the figure of Sam Easy,

his head in a bandage, old hat sawed on to one side in an attempt to hide it.

"Luke!"

"Uh-uh," The grunt behind the gag was all that Luke Drinkwater could muster, but it was enough. Match quickly whipped out, Sam Easy dropped to a squat beside him, hands working swiftly in the darkness until he had removed the gag.

"An' now," the sheriff's voice was like a series of whispers, "maybe yuh can tell a fella what'n hell you're doin' here? Looks like you're goin' back to yore native state of pole-cat-in-a-hole."

"He'll—kill—yuh, too, Sam." It took a long time for the old man to use his voice, and then it came in jerks and sudden stops of harsh whispers. "Sneaky Pete's—bad—medicine. He killed Ike. Said—at first—he'd killed yuh."

"Almost did it, too." The sheriff's voice came with the hint of a chuckle. "Head was just too thick, I reckon, Luke. What'n hell did he kill Ike for? Ike was shorely workin' for the cattle pool. An'," he added hastily, "why didn't he kill yuh in jail, too?"

"They want the Drinkwater outfit before they stop my clock, Sam." It took the old man another period of time before he could come out with that, all in a rush. "Me shot dead without signin' all the papers wouldn't do. An' they'd sound legal an' all that, payin' up for money Ike borrowed an' lost in Kansas City, an' the other debts he was supposed to have run up, too.

"Ike killed a man an' a woman in Kansas City, Sam. That is, he was supposed to. Ike died without knowin' the truth, I guess. Sneaky Pete told me about it not more'n—well, hell, the last time he was here to stand an' poke fun at me.

"Yuh see, it was a fake fight in some fool gamblin' cellar back there in the big town. Ike was drunk, as usual when his pockets was full of money. A gal had been playin' him. He got slapped by a fella an' come up from the table shootin'. The gal an' the other fella fell. There was some blood from somewhere, an' Ike was told they were both dead. It scared the livin' hell outa him, an' the gang back there roped him in to do just what he was told to do. This cow pool's all a big fake, Sam. Nobody'll get a dime from the cows they pour into it."

"An' yuh would go in on a deal like that, Luke?"

"Had to, Sam," winced the old man. "Either that or see—I thought—Ike taken back to Kansas City an' hung. Now they'll get the Drinkwater, then the Highlander—all of it fore they're done."

"You're a bigger damn fool than I thought." Sam Easy's voice was hard in the darkness. "No matter. We'll play 'er out. I just hap-

pened to think of this hole, an' I saddled up an' pretended to ride outa town at sundown, sayin' I was goin' out to bring in Fuzzy Frank. Atter dark I switched back. Where'll they take yuh from here—if anywhere?"

"Don't know." The answer came with something like a shudder in the old man's voice. "Sneaky Pete ain't said. Maybe doesn't know. He's just the prize-hawg killer for Brady an' Shell, Trigger doctor, they call 'em, Ike said once. But don't just set there. Git me outa here."

"Nope, yuh ain't goin' nowhere yet." Sam Easy was feeling for his face, about to return the gag. "Yuh set in with 'em to ruin this country. Now yuh set out the game, keepin' yore mouth shut. I ain't goin' to be too far away from yuh from now on. I've got to see this thing through."

"Don't, don't." Old Luke was rolling his head from side to side, but the gag was going back in place in spite of him. In a minute the job was done, with grunts that were probably intended for curses coming from behind the gag.

"Now yuh lay like yuh was," growled the sheriff. "I oughta maybe let yuh lie there forever, yuh old cuss, or just kick yuh in the guts an' throw yuh in the river. But I can't throw yuh nowhere until I get that chain off yore feet. I'll have to get a bolt-cutter from the blacksmith shop for that job. But I'll be back. If Sneaky comes while I'm gone he'll find yuh just like he left yuh. That means he won't know that I come down here an' found yuh."

Then he turned and moved quietly away, heading for new troubles.

Chapter IV

SAM EASY DOES IT EASY

THE WHISPERING night wind was cool on his cheeks when Sam Easy eased himself out of the mouth of the hole and turned to start working his way upward in the shelves of rock above the river. As yet there was no light in the bank, and wouldn't be. Nobody would be fool enough for that. There was no moon, either, making the ascent dark and dangerous. For the last few yards he was on his hands and knees, careful to keep away from the wider ledges where he might meet somebody sneaking along to that dark-mouthed hole below the bank.

He was in an ideal position for the worst to happen to him when he slid over the last shelf behind old Boot Bender's saddle shop with its rear wall extended to within a yard of the rim. Here it was slightly lighter, and it was here that the blow fell, the muzzle of a six-shooter stabbing forward, just as he was getting to his

feet, and pressing hard against his back.

"Sam Easy does it *easy*, doesn't he, chum?" hissed a voice behind him. "One move and I blow you. One shot and you hit that river below. Lift your hands, you small-town clown."

It was Sneaky Pete Pardeau. Sam Easy had known it by the time Pete had spoken his first five words. With the gunman's left hand reaching forward and catching Easy's heavy belts from behind, he was pulled backward now for a pace, the pressure of the six-shooter muzzle in his back telling him when to stop. In a matter of seconds after that Sneaky Pete was slipping his long .45's from their holsters and tossing them over the rim.

"Little bad-town sheriffs," Pardeau chuckled almost softly, "oughtn't to play with firearms, Easy. Guess I'll take the handcuffs out of the armhole of your vest now. *Easy, Easy!*" He gave the muzzle of the six-shooter a boring twist in the sheriff's back. "One shot, one kick as you're falling, and over the rim to the river you go."

"Yuh seem to be the doctor right now, Sneaky." The sheriff's voice was calm. "I'm the patient takin' yore pills."

"Have a nice talk with old man Luke?" Pardeau had the handcuffs and was carefully pulling down Easy's left arm to bring it up behind his back. "Told you a lot of sweet things, I guess?"

"Some, maybe." Knowing there was no use trying to lie about it, Sam Easy was still as calm as an old boot. "Said yuh was a slick article, an' I reckon he didn't lie about it, Sneaky."

"I don't like that name any too well, Easy!" The muzzle of the six-shooter bored again, the weapon higher in the sheriff's back now to make certain that the hand behind him would not grab for it. "A lot do call me that, but they're mostly my friends. Slip down that right hand and be careful with it. Remember, one shot, one kick—"

"Yuh needn't remind me." A hard little smile streaked the sheriff's face. "I ain't exactly all damn fool."

"A lot of them said you were not." The handcuffs were clicking now. "But you do make mistakes, Easy. I noticed you studying the shelves of bluffs here only yesterday. Tonight you didn't fool me. A man like you wouldn't go out after Fuzzy Frank Swindell without a rifle hung on his saddle. I know that much, and I set a trap for you, Easy. One at the jail, one here. More men are working for us than any of these yokels think. Hell, two men were watching you when you crawled in that hole to find old man Luke Drinkwater."

"Sorta thought I heard a gravel roll." Sam Easy looked up at the sky as if wondering when the late moon would rise. "But then,"

he shrugged, "gravel just loosens an' rolls by itself in the bluffs now an' then. I've seen whole shelves bust off an' fall."

"You can tell us about that some other time." Sneaky Pete took a firm grip on the link-chain with his left hand and gave his six-shooter another twist. "We'll get going now. No fuss and there'll be no muss, chum. Watch your feet. We don't have a whole park to play around in up here on this rim."

Then Sam Easy was being marched away, the muzzle of the gun still hard against his back, Sneaky Pete's left hand firm on the link-chain between the 'cuffs. At once he saw that they were heading for a little-used rear door of the bank. A couple of minutes later Sneaky Pete was tapping on the door with his toe.

"Who is it?" hissed a voice as the door cracked open. "Pete?"

"Wouldn't think it was George Washington, would you?" There was the small hint of laughter behind the gunman's voice. "Widen up and let the sheriff of Buckskin River inside. It's getting chilly out here."

Then Sam Easy was inside, the door carefully closed and bolted behind him. With the blinds on the windows drawn he could see that saddle blankets had also been hung over the blinds when old Rice Grant, bending over his desk, turned up the wick of a lamp.

"Good evening, Sam. Nice to have you with us." The banker had turned, rubbing his lean old hands. There in the lamplight Easy had never seen him look more like a buzzard. "I naturally knew we would have a lot of trouble with you, otherwise I might have tried to pull you over on our little side of the fence. Meet your friends."

RICE GRANT stepped to one side then and waved his hand, and Sam Easy's eyes grew big and round for a moment. Sitting in chairs propped against the south wall with their hands behind them were two men who had been the most bitter enemies in the country for the past six months.

Sam Easy had seen Julian Brady and Horth Shell sitting under a draped and blanket-covered west window. Now he was staring at Green Hatfield, and to Green Hatfield's right sat Fuzzy Frank Swindell, looking very calm and tame, all the fight taken out of him.

"And this, gentlemen," Grant bowed and waved his hands like some old ring-master in a circus, "completes the picture, I believe. Here we have Green Hatfield who just about dominates the north bulge of the cow country in spite of Hellfire Buck Allan. And here," he waved at Swindell, "we have our one-time Texas Hank Sawyer, known far and wide in this part of the country as Swindell, undisputed boss of the south bulge of the country."

Bushwhack Day at Buckskin River

No one has ever accused Old Luke Drinkwater of being the boss of anything, not even his own son. Neat, isn't it?"

"Neat!" Julian Brady answered him, the usual big cigar in his face. A man of somewhere just past fifty, he was smiling now, and then Sam Easy saw a slow smile make its way across Horth Shell's round, dark face with its graying hair at the temples. "Only needs one more to complete the picture, and then we can all be satisfied. Better use another pair of the sheriff's splendid supply of handcuffs, Pete. If we run out you can slip back to the jail for more."

"What—what in hell does this mean!" Rice Grant had lurched back against his desk, his face chalky-white on an instant, his long claws of hands jerking upward. "That—that damned fool's got a gun on me! Put—put," his voice dropped to a low squeak, "it down, Mr. Pardeau. I—I'm helping you people."

"I don't take orders from you, old moneybags." Sneaky Pete was grinning now in the lamplight. His six-shooter was back in his hand, the muzzle covering the banker. "Why they want you at this last minute is more than I know, but I follow orders. Put your hands behind your back—right now before I let lamplight through you."

"But—but I'm your friend! I—I'm helping you people!"

"Put 'em, I said." Sneaky Pete's tone had become slippery and nasty. "I don't like to tell a man twice."

"But Julian!" cried the banker.

"Do as Sneaky tells you!" Julian Brady was on his feet now, cigar looking as if clamped in the mouth of a bulldog, dark eyes sparkling below his knitted black brows. "You did a damned sight more than this to me twenty years ago in a certain big Eastern city we both know. I went to the penitentiary for eleven long years for you, Eldon Seller. You came hustling out here and changed your name. It didn't change me. I swore that day in court you'd one day hear the rattlesnake rattle." He threw back his head and laughed. "You hear the rattle now!"

"That's it, just like that!" A pair of handcuffs chattered at that moment on Rice Grant's wrists, but Sneaky Pete was having to hold him a second later. Grant had suddenly slumped backward, jarring the desk and almost upsetting the lamp. "Stand up!"

But there was little need for that order from Sneaky Pete. Sam Easy had caught one good glimpse of the banker's face. Old Doc Chumm had said for years that he had heart trouble and was apt to drop dead anywhere. It looked as if death had come now, even before Sneaky Pete, still cursing him, swung him around and



Become an Expert Accountant

The Profession That Pays

The demand for skilled accountants—men who really know their business—is increasing. National and state legislation is requiring of business—both big and small—much more in matters relating to Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important field are promoted to responsible executive positions—given an opportunity to earn real salaries. The range is from \$3,000 to \$10,000 a year, even to higher income figures.

Send for Free Book—

"Accountancy, the Profession That Pays"

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you may equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable, growing profession?

Knowledge of bookkeeping unnecessary. Our free book on accountancy fully explains how we train you from ground up, or according to your individual needs. Low cost; easy terms.

The facts about the new LaSalle training in Accountancy and the opportunities in this highly profitable field are clearly outlined in a 48-page book which LaSalle will send you free.

The man in earnest to get ahead will find this coupon a most profitable aid to progress. If you have the urge and the will to increase your income, clip and mail the coupon NOW.

G. I. APPROVED

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

Dept. 2334-HA 417 So. Dearborn St. Chicago 5

I would welcome details of opportunities in accounting, together with copy of "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," without obligation.

☐ **Higher Accountancy**

Other LaSalle Opportunities

LaSalle opens the way to success in every important field of business. If interested in one of the fields below, check and mail.

☐ **Business Management**

☐ **Modern Salesmanship**

☐ **Traffic Management**

☐ **Foremanship**

☐ **Industrial Management**

☐ **Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)**

☐ **Law—Degree of LL.B.**

☐ **Commercial Law**

☐ **Modern Business**

☐ **Correspondence**

☐ **Expert Bookkeeping**

☐ **C. P. A. Coaching**



Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE

Borrow \$50 to \$300

Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow **BY MAIL** \$50.00 to \$300.00 this easy quick confidential way.

BY MAIL

IT IS EASY TO BORROW BY MAIL!

Completely confidential and private. Convenient Month-by-Month Payments

NO ENDORSERS NEEDED
EMPLOYED MEN and women of good character can solve their money problems quickly and in privacy with loans **MADE BY MAIL**. No endorsers or co-signers. We do not contact employers, friends or relatives. Convenient monthly payments. Send us your name and address and we will mail application blank and complete details **FREE** in plain envelope. There is no obligation.

STATE FINANCE CO.

314 Walker Bank Bldg., Dept. G-71, Salt Lake City 9, Utah



STUDY AT HOME FOR PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS, 36 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. L.B. Carey awarded 131 texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for **FREE BOOK "Law and Executive Guidance"**—NOW!

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 74-B, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 24, Ill.

START YOUR OWN BUSINESS

on our capital. Always your own boss. Hundreds average \$6,000 to \$25,000 annual sales year after year. We supply stocks, equipment on credit, 300 home necessities. Selling experience unnecessary to start. Wonderful opportunity to own pleasant, profitable business backed by world wide industry. Write **RAWLEIGH CO.**, Dept. B-1-PBL, Peapack, Illinois.



Locksmithing AND KEY MAKING Now Made Easy!

Practical up-to-date course teaches you how to pick locks, de-code, make masterkeys, repair, install, service, etc. New self-instruction lessons for every lockpicking, a homeowner, carpenter, mechanic, service station operator, fix-it shop, hardware dealer, gunsmith. 68 easy illustrated lessons. Low price! **Send for Free details, write**

Big Success—FREE
WELSON CO., 1139 So. Wabash Ave., Dept. B05, Chicago 4, Ill.

Ready to Highball

—with a clear board for February, Railroad Magazine is out on the mainline again with a full consist of fact articles, photo stories and fiction. \$2.50 by the year. Address

RAILROAD MAGAZINE

205 East 42nd Street, New York City 17

DON'T SUFFER FROM SKIN IRRITATION

due to ✓chafing from braces, trusses, girdles, corsets, etc. ✓bed sores ✓itching

NEW! Get wonderful new quick relief from skin irritation, itching, burning due to friction, rubbing, chafing—with amazing new Mennen **QUICOOL** powder! New scientific formula perfected by Mennen skin specialists—works fast, helps prevent and relieve chafing, bed sores, many externally-caused rashes. Wonderful too for baby's diaper rash, prickly heat, etc. Smooth on mild, soothing **QUICOOL** powder after bath also—refreshing, light scent. Get **QUICOOL** now for entire family. **GUARANTEED:** Double your money back if not satisfied.

QUICK! GET

MENNEEN QUICOOL

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

let him sprawl out full-length on the floor. "And the rattle of the rattler," a grin on Julian Brady's dark face made him look like a laughing fat devil, "knocks him cold."

IT LOOKED like the end of everything when Old Luke Drinkwater was brought up, shaking with cold, cringing, it seemed, from his own shadow. By this time Grant was back to life, a couple of glasses of cold tap water enough to start his feet kicking as it was poured on his face and inside the bosom of his shirt.

Now Sam Easy saw high-handed robbery in its worst form. Old Luke had completely gone to pieces, but there was some little fight yet left in him when they jammed him down at the desk and shoved a pen in his freed right hand. He hurled the pen aside and was about to lurch to his feet when Sneaky Pete, standing behind his chair, slammed him back. A second later, had it not been for the gag in his mouth, men might have heard the old man's yell far down the street in spite of the carefully closed doors and covered windows.

"Sign them!" As he spoke Sneaky Pete, having lighted a fat cigar, brought fire down on the back of the old man's neck. "Sign!"

It took only a more stabs of the end of the burning cigar before Drinkwater's hand was snatching for the pen and writing his name in a big scrawl on paper after paper the smiling Horth Shell shoved in front of him. Then he flopped back, out of breath, tears in the old eyes, a white froth working itself out around the gag.

"Hatfield and this fellow who calls himself Swindell were not half as tough as you were." Shell could laugh now. "Get our friend behind the desk, Sneaky."

Drinkwater was brushed aside then, wrists rehandcuffed behind him, and the banker was shoved behind his desk.

"Twenty years ago," he said, "I did a wrong. I stole money from a bank and let you sing for it." His eyes were on Brady. "Tonight, I suppose, I'll pay for it with my life. What you will do to my bank and this town and country is something I don't know. None of us will know." The handcuff had been taken from his left wrist. He waved his right hand, the cuff hanging there. "Sink Hole Bend will swallow us. That will be the end, the vanishing point—"

"Sign and no speech-making!" snapped Shell as he shoved papers in front of the banker. "Keep that for Saint Peter!"

"Or let me cigar 'im a little." Sneaky Pete stepped forward, grinning, the cigar ready. "I'll move any of them."

"Like this, d' you mean?"

Bushwhack Day at Buckskin River

Rice Grant might have waited a little while longer. Sam Easy told himself that as the old man flashed into action, both hands above the top of the desk, desperation asserting itself. Sneaky Pete was to his right, bent slightly forward. The sudden smash of the handcuffed hand caught the killer in the face and mouth, knocking him backward, the flying rush of blood splattering over the desk. Then, before Shell could stop him, the free left hand had struck the lamp, sending it crashing against the wall to plunge the room into darkness.

It was Sam Easy's one long chance. The handcuffs behind him were old, the link-chain worn in half. With one fierce surge he broke it, his big hands flying apart. Sneaky Pete was right in front of him and had thrown both hands to his face, the wicked cigar in his left hand, and by the glow the sheriff struck his first blow, a long, sweeping haymaker that landed squarely on the back of Sneaky Pete's neck, knocking him half-way across the desk.

"Watch Grant!" The warning came from Horth Shell. "Make a light, quick!"

Brady made the light, an instant flash from a stubby black Colt that had been jerked from his hip pocket. By the flash he saw what had happened to Sneaky Pete, and he fired a second shot, this time at Sam Easy, but Sam Easy was not there to stop the bullet. He dropped at the end of the desk, grabbing the limp Sneaky Pete by the legs.

Easy was a tiger in action now, a man who cared no more about these big-town hoodlums than the gophers in the old basement cells of the jailhouse. Blood dripping from his wrists, he swung Sneaky Pete upward. Before Brady could fire another shot the unconscious Pete was flying through the air to strike Brady in the chest and knock him down, his head hitting the wall and dazing him.

"Don't wake the whole damned town with that shooting!" Shell snarled, still the coolest one in the lot now that the sudden fury had broken loose. Easy heard him then, stumbling over a chair. "No, you don't, Rice Grant!"

It seemed a race was going on beyond the desk. The fear of death upon him, Grant was trying to get into the front room of the bank and slam the door behind him. In his rush he carried Shell off his feet, both men struggling on the floor, Grant fighting like a wildcat gone crazy at the world.

But Sam Easy was not listening to it. He was going forward in a rush, his big fists swinging like clubs, the one hope in his mind that Hatfield and Swindell, both seasoned fighting men in any kind of a jam, would have sense enough to rock themselves over in their chairs to the floor.

Without Sneaky Pete it might have been

THE BROMPTON MECHANICAL PENCIL

ALL METAL — ALUMINUM

The Mechanical Better Looking Pencil of Unusual Interest

This is the pencil that is arousing so much interest wherever it is on display. DIFFERENT UNUSUAL and VERY ATTRACTIVE. Precision is built into the BROMPTON PENCIL to LAST and SERVE with FAITHFUL PERFORMANCE. You will instantly notice the difference. It catches the eye.

in very attractive colors:

MAROON, BLUE, BLACK AND NATURAL

the pencil you will be proud to carry

In 4 ATTRACTIVE COLORS - it gives you the preference of color that you like best in a precision built pencil made of DURABLE ALUMINUM built for long and faithful service.

ON SALE EVERYWHERE FOR ONLY \$1.00

If your dealer does not have them... then mail order direct.

BROMPTON SALES CO. Dept. P-2
3171 No. Halsted St. CHICAGO 13

CUT OUT THIS BAND TO FIND RING SIZE

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

AUTHENTIC WESTERN
SADDLE RING
FOR MEN! & WOMEN!
PURE STERLING SILVER

Only \$4.95

Postpaid We Pay Tax

First time at anywhere near this low price! Authentic replica of romantic western saddle. Hand-somely formed from solid Sterling Silver by Navajo Indian craftsmen. Massive style for men, dainty style for women. A gift of distinction. A pleasure to wear. Sent on approval.

SEND NO MONEY! Just clip this ad and mail with your name and address. Pay postman only \$4.95 plus few cents postage on arrival; or send cash and we pay postage. Wear this sensational ring for 10 days. If not delighted, return for full refund. ORDER NOW! USE COUPON BELOW!

10 DAY TRIAL ORDER COUPON

ARIZONA CRAFTSMEN Room 617C
1904 FARNAM ST. OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

SEND Sterling Saddle Ring as I have indicated below.

☐ C.O.D. ☐ Cash Enclosed, Send Postpaid

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

☐ Men's

☐ Women's

Ring Size _____

FOOT RELIEF in 2 minutes!

DO THIS DAILY: Get wonderful quick relief and healthier feet with this exercise recommended by most Chiropradists (foot specialists). Bend feet under, flex from side to side, curl toes down, spread toes apart; repeat 10 times. Then massage feet, and between toes, with soothing Mennen QUINSANA fungicidal foot powder. Comforts, peeps up feet. Amazingly effective against Athlete's Foot, excessive perspiration, foot odor. Shake QUINSANA in shoes daily. Get QUINSANA now for greater foot comfort.

MENNEEN QUINSANA

High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-249, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37



TOOTHACHE?

DOE TO CAVITY

GET QUICK, amazing relief by pinching Dent's Tooth Gum—Or Drops—in cavity of aching tooth. Follow directions. Cavity toothache frequently strikes when you can't see dentist. Be prepared. Ask your druggist for package. Keep handy for children, too.

DENT'S TOOTH GUM 25¢
TOOTH DROPS

MAKE THIS SUIT YOURS NEW PLAN



EARN CASH SHOWING TO FRIENDS!

Write at once if you want this fine made-to-measure suit! You can get it by taking a few orders from friends, and earn up to \$10, \$12 in a day. Your bonus suit helps you take more orders with latest style, made-to-measure guaranteed suits at amazingly low prices. Also complete line of Ladies' Tailored Suits. No experience, no money needed. Write TODAY for FREE SAMPLES—telling about yourself—age, etc. No obligation. PIONEER TAILORING CO. Dept. P-1096, Chicago 7, Ill.

NEW CHEAP OIL BURNER

FOR COOKING & HEATING STOVES-FURNACES
HEAT YOUR HOME, COOK YOUR MEALS
WITH CHEAP FURNACE OIL



NO MORE SHOVELING COAL OR ASHES. A New Fuelizer Starter Vaporizing System turns Cheap 130 Flash Furnace Oil, Dieselate, Kerosene, etc. into Oil Gas heat without clogging up. LIFETIME GUARANTEE against defects. \$1.00 Bonus Offer for telling. We will let you in your own stove or furnace for one month. Get yours for introducing. Big Profits QUICK. Be first. Send in your name TODAY.

NORTHWEST MFG. CO., 550-B 5th, Mitchell, So. Dakota



ITCH CHECKED IN A JIFFY

Sufferers from the torturing itch caused by eczema, pimples, scales, scabies, athlete's foot, "factory" itch, and other itch troubles are praising cooling, liquid D. D. D. Prescription. This time-proved medication—developed by Dr. D. D. Dennis—positively relieves that cruel, burning itch. Greaseless and stainless. Soothes and comforts even the most intense itching in a jiffy. A 35c trial bottle proves its merits or your money back. Ask your druggist today for D. D. D. Prescription.

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

over in a matter of seconds. Sam Easy got in one wild haymaker that landed high on a head, slamming down a hard hat that told him the receiver of the blow was Brady. Then he felt something twist around on the floor, brush against his legs and knock him sprawling.

Sneaky Pete was never to be counted down and out until he was dead and laid out on a plank. He was once more back in circulation. The smashing into Brady seemed to have somehow revived him. Still dazed, but with plenty of fight left in him, he had dropped his six-shooter. But now he had another weapon, a tooth-plugger .32 with crosses cut in the ends of the bullets to make them split and fly in four directions once they had struck their target—deadly slugs of lead if he could only get the muzzle of his gun in the right man's belly.

But Sneaky Pete was not staying there, not going to continue any fool fight in a room where he could not see his own hand in front of him. Up like a human rat, he shot to the side door, yanking it open and flinging to his right, gaining the advantage of the wall, his deadly little gun out now and ready for a kill.

FOR A MOMENT it gave Sam Easy a break. The moon was just beginning to throw a wide flair of light over the Crazy Bones, and some of the light came through the open doorway. It was enough for him to see Brady up and against the wall, his stubby six-shooter glinting on the floor at his feet.

Tired of using his big hands as mauls, Sam Easy grabbed the six-shooter as he came up, tearing into action. He hit one blow, a terrible, smashing lick straight to Brady's face and mouth, and Julian Brady was down, probably not knowing whether he had been hit by a man or the crack Westbound Limited that had brought him out into this country.

"I've got him!" Horth Shell sounded addled by the commotion. He was coming around the desk, dragging the limp figure of Rice Grant by the collar. "Maybe cracked his skull—Damn!"

The sheriff of Buckskin River had swung on him, his first blow a trifle short of its mark, only the end of the barrel catching Shell in the mouth to send several gold-capped teeth flying. Before he could recover Easy had struck a better blow, a solid smash to the side of the face—and Horth Shell was out cold behind the desk, the unconscious Rice Grant sprawling where he had been dropped.

"Look out for Sneaky!" The warning came from low on the floor, the voice that of Green Hatfield. "He's just outside the door waitin' for yuh, Sam. See?" All the words had come in a low tone, the last in a tense whisper. "See his shadow?"

Bushwhack Day at Buckskin River

Sam Easy saw it. Sneaky Pete, he reckoned, didn't have the gumption of a bald buzzard, standing there with that growing light over the Crazy Bones behind him. In a second Easy was at the door, six-shooter slipped to his left hand. When it came to rats like Sneaky Pete a man did not stand and fool, no more than one would take chances with a rattler. Sam Easy simply slammed his left hand forward, hooked it to the right, and before a man could blink two shots had filled the night, one bullet hitting his man in the right arm, the other tearing straight through his belly.

Then Sam Easy heard something else that startled him. All Buckskin River was suddenly bursting into gunfire, with the thunder of racing hoofs, the yelling of men and the slamming of doors sounding above the crash of weapons.

"It's Highlanders an' Drinkwaters, Sam." The admission came from the floor against the wall where Fuzzy Frank Swindell and Green Hatfield had rocked themselves over in their chairs. "It was a cut an' dried mess since 'fore sundown. There's plenty of Crazy Boners, Rafter Arrows an' Hatfield men left in town. Ever'body knowed they'd stay late to celebrate. I sneaked back to sorter help direct it, an' they made me a prisoner here in the bank just a little while 'fore Green was brought in on the end of a gun by Sneaky. We've got to stop it. Our guns are in the end drawer of the desk. . . ."

He was saying more, but half of what he had already said was lost in the furious noise outside. It seemed as if a desperate, last-stand fight was being made in front of the bank.

Sam Easy never moved faster. With a handcuff key taken from his watch pocket, he had Hatfield, Swindell and Old Luke free in a minute, Old Luke ripping the gag from his mouth.

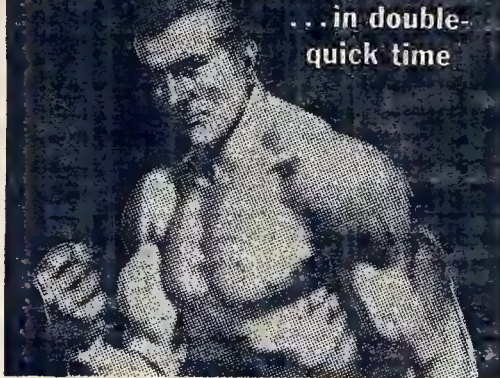
"Grab yourself each a man!" he snapped now. "Then we'll light the big lamps in the front room and throw open them wide an' fancy doors old Rice said he paid so much money for. By now, yuh damn fools oughta have had enough of yore cow pool!"

They were moving into the front room then, Easy dropping his man to light the big swinging lamps that would throw light all the way across the street. In two or three minutes more drapes were snatched off the wide front windows, the blinds run all the way to the top. Then the doors were thrown open, and the four men stepped forward in the light, Old Luke dragging the body of Sneaky Pete, each of the other three an unconscious figure.

For a minute it was like stepping straight into a roaring hell. Gunfire tore from each side of the street. Men were crowded into doorways, down on their hands and knees in

"Let me show **YOU** too, HOW TO MAKE YOURSELF COMMANDO-TOUGH

...in double-quick time



...OR IT WON'T COST YOU A CENT!"

says *George F. Jowett*

WORLD'S GREATEST BODY BUILDER

Let me prove to YOU that you can put inches of dynamic muscles on your arms! Add inches to your chest! Broaden your shoulders and power-pack the rest of your body. I can do for you what I've done for thousands the world over, including many officers and men now in the U. S. and British Armed Forces!

GIVE ME 10 MINUTES A DAY!

I'll Show You My Secrets of Body Building

I'll help you learn the "Progressive Power Method" through which I rebuilt myself from a physical wreck to the holder of more strength records than any other living athlete or teacher! No matter how skinny or flabby you are, you can learn my methods right in your own home. Through my proved secrets I show you how to develop your power, inside and out, until YOU are fully satisfied that you are the man you want to be. "The Jowett System," says R. F. Kelly, Physical Director of the YMCA, Atlantic City, "is the greatest in the world!"

If you want a physique that will inspire respect from men and admiration from women... **ACT LIKE A HE-MAN!** Decide at once! The famous book, "Nerves of Steel—Muscles Like Iron" will be included FREE! Priceless for the strength fan! Full of photos of marvelous power-bodied men who will show you what Jowett has done for them and how he can do the same for you. Reach out... Grasp this Special Offer today!

Jowett Institute, Dept. P-72
230 Fifth Avenue
New York 1, N. Y.

PROVE TO YOURSELF IN ONE NIGHT!

Send only 25c for Test Course, "Molding a Mighty Arm." Read it the evening it arrives—learn from experience the thrill you can give your muscles!

**SEND FOR THESE FIVE
FAMOUS COURSES IN
BOOK FORM
ONLY 25c EACH
or ALL 5 for \$1.00**

QUICK ACTION BRINGS

**THIS
BOOK
FREE!**



PHOTO BOOK OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN **FREE**



Jowett Institute of Physical Culture, Dept. P-72
230 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N. Y.

George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below, for which I enclose (). Include FREE book of PHOTOS.

George F. Jowett Champions of ☐ All 5 courses for.....\$1 ☐ Molding Mighty Legs 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Arm 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Grip 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Back 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Chest 25c
Champions ☐ Send all 5 C.O.D. (\$1 plus postage.) No orders less than \$1 sent C.O.D.

NAME (Print name) Age.....

ADDRESS

Beware Coughs from common colds That Hang On

• Creomulsion relieves promptly because it goes right to the seat of the trouble to help loosen and expel germ laden phlegm, and aid nature to soothe and heal raw, tender inflamed bronchial mucous membranes. Tell your druggist to sell you a bottle of Creomulsion with the understanding you must like the way it quickly allays the cough or you are to have your money back.

CREOMULSION
For Coughs, Chest Colds, Bronchitis

Opportunity of Lifetime

Supplying DDT and other profitable products to farmers. No experience or capital required. Must have auto and good references. Permanent. Write or wire.

McNESS COMPANY

Dept. 716-47

Freeport, Illinois

INVENTORS

Patent laws encourage the development of inventions. Our firm is registered to practice before the U. S. Patent Office. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.

McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

1506 Victor Building

Washington 1, D. C.

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 46 years.

Benj. M. Bogue, Dept. 2987, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

GET THIS
FREE
BOOK

Train Your Own HORSES!

Coffs - Stock Horses - Circus Horses
Gait Show Horses - Write for FREE BOOK
ANIMAL LOVERS' ASSOCIATION
Box G-111, Tarzana, Calif.



Backache Whipped By Man and Wife

If you suffer from Backache, Leg or Rheumatic pains, Nervousness, Swollen Ankles, Burning Passages, Bladder Weakness, or Getting Up Nights, due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles, you may easily enjoy the delightful benefits experienced by thousands who have depended on Cystex for such troubles. The following letter from a well-known Massachusetts housewife is typical of those received from Cystex users all over the world: "I was so laid up with pains in my back, legs and arms that I was miserable. Finally I decided to try your Cystex. In a couple of weeks I was like a new person, the pains had left and I could walk anywhere. My husband had pains in his arms, took Cystex and the pains left." To prove what Cystex may do to bring you joyous help from the distress due to above mentioned Kidney and Bladder troubles, get Cystex from your druggist. Give it a fair trial exactly according to the simple directions. Unless completely satisfied and delighted with your rapid improvement, your money back is guaranteed. So don't suffer another day without trying Cystex.

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

alleyways, hiding behind any cover they could find. Then Swindell and Old Luke were yelling at the tops of their voices:

"Shut 'er down, Highlanders an' Drinkwaters. Shut 'er down! This is Luke Drinkwater. The cow pool's settled."

Minutes later Sam Easy made one attempt to get his prisoners to the jailhouse, but he knew that it was useless at the start. Crazy Boners, Hatfield men, Highlanders and Drinkwaters swarmed around him, their part of the fight over. They pinned his arms behind him; then a gang swung him to their shoulders, swarming on up to the jailhouse with him, Grant, Brady and Shell yelling bloody murder behind him. In the office of the jail they pushed him into a chair, and somebody held a pint of whiskey to his lips. It was either drink or drown in it, and he gulped half of it down.

* * *

By eleven o'clock in the morning he had had his coffee and was sitting in the old chair again on the porch. Buckskin River was still filled with men who had been fighting each other only hours before, but Sam Easy had never seen the town so quiet. Several men had left the town, including Judge Scully, Gage Lantry and Roosh Hendry. Probably a dozen others were going away on a little vacation until things at least cooled down, Sam Easy reckoned. It was the quickest ending of a war he had ever seen in all his time in this rip-roaring Buckskin River country! Because of his age, they had said, a gang had brought old Rice Grant up to the jailhouse with his coat torn off and the seat of his pants kicked out. Three more men—hoodlums from a big town who had thought they could pull high-handed robbery and get away with it out here—were down there in the back room of Doc Chumm's dingy office, sprawled on tables along with Cockeyed Ike.

Yep, it was shore peaceful now. Boots lay asleep on the porch. Sam Easy was dozing when a buggy pulled up and Mattie Martha Hatfield got out, looking sweeter'n red stickcandy in her Sunday go-to-meetin' clothes. He met her at the foot of the steps, staring at the big basket in her hand.

"Fried sage hens and chicken and biscuits like you like them, Sam!" she told him, looking up at him, for some reason, with a quivering lip and moisture in her eyes. "Dad came in at sunrise and told us. Can I come in?"

"If yuh do," he said, "I may not let yuh out so easy. Yuh see," he looked down the street, "I've been tryin' to ask yuh somethin' for a long time. This fool war, I think, has give me just guts enough to do it. Come on before I lose my nerve, Martha."

THE END

SODBUSTERS WANTED—DEAD!

(Continued from page 57)

struggling and panting in his effort, when May Bradley and three of the Cross cowhands came thundering into the yard.

May slipped from her mount and ran to Jim, too frightened to cry. But she soon had bandages around his two wounds, and was helping him to his feet.

The Cross boys were grouped around old Scotty MacLean. The cowman's heavy growling curses rumbled from his throat when one of the cowhands tied a tight handkerchief over the bloody hole in his shoulder.

Later, in the buckboard on the way to town and Willow Grove's sawbones, MacLean winked slyly at May, and grinned.

"You wouldn't want to hire out that man of yours, would you?" he asked. "I'd sorta like to give him a job on that line camp back there for the winter. A salty jasper like him oughta scare off any hungry Injuns, or slow-elkers."

Color came back into May's wan face.

"Why—why, I don't know, Mr. MacLean," she answered. "I'm afraid Jim will be pretty busy on our place."

Scotty shook his big head.

"No'm, he won't," he chuckled. "That hay he put up, he ain't got but them two old crow-baits to feed it to, them an' your milch cow. He's goin' to sell me the hay for my critters, an' then he won't need to cut his fence. Yep, I'll throw my bunch of cows down on my south range." He grinned across at Jim.

Jim grinned back and stuck out his hand. The two men gripped, and one of the punchers let out a wild "Yippee."

"Takes all kinds to tame this here raw country," MacLean said. "Reckon I been a stubborn old fool."

"Two of us," Jim nodded, "but no more." He looked at May then, and grinned sheepishly. "You told me Scotty was all right," he told her, "but I had to be showed. The hard way."

A TOOLSHOP IN YOUR HAND



Smooth, steady power at your fingertips! Plug Handee in any AC or DC socket, and you're ready to grind, drill, polish, rout, carve, sand, saw, engrave on metal, wood, plastic, horn, glass, etc. Weighs 12 oz. 25,000 r.p.m. In steel case with complete accessory assortment, postpaid, \$27.50. Handee only with 7 accessories, \$20.50.

A Fine Gift for a Friend or Yourself! Order Now! Prompt Delivery

FREE! 52-Page Manual!

CHICAGO WHEEL & MFG. CO.
2101 Monroe St., Dept. P8,
Chicago 7, Ill.

HANDEE

TOOL OF 1001 USES

ANYONE CAN DO THIS IF THEY HAVE OUR CHART



Special Offer for Agents

Size Print 27"x36" now printed on both sides showing squares full size. Shows how to find the length of any rafter, find any angle in degrees, frame any polygon 3 to 16 sides, read the board foot and brace tables, octagon scale, rafter tables, many other uses can be scaled down for model work as well as full scale framing. Also chart changing pitches to degrees. For use with radial saws. About 13 square feet of printed copy. Sent post paid for \$1. Money order or check—no stamps. MASON ENGINEERING SERVICE, 2104 N. Durick St., Dept. 2, Kalamazoo, Mi.

DRAW for MONEY!

Be An ARTIST!



Trained Artists Are Capable of Earning \$50, \$60, \$75 a Week

It's pleasant and interesting to study Art the W.S.A. way. COMMERCIAL ART, DESIGNING, CARTOONING all in ONE complete home study course. No previous Art experience necessary—hundreds have profited by our practical methods since 1914. TWO ART OPPORTUNITIES furnished. Full information in FREE BOOK, "Art for Pleasure and Profit." Write today. Course available under "G.I." Bill.

FREE BOOK gives details

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART,
Studio 242-H, 1115 15th St., N.W.,
Washington 5, D. C.

NAME..... AGE.....

Street.....

City..... Zone () State.....

Now A DYNAMIC HEAVY DUTY INDUSTRIAL WELDER

FOR ONLY \$23.50 COMPLETE...

AVAILABLE NOW IMMEDIATE DELIVERIES

IDEAL FOR AUTO - HOME APPLIANCE AND FARM REPAIRS

DESIGNED TO DO HIGH GRADE WELDING INEXPENSIVELY—Maintenance Men; Farmers; Mechanics; Machine Shops; Foundries; Auto, General Repair and Job Welding Shops; all using the DYNAMIC find it so indispensable and useful that they cannot afford to be without it. If inexperienced, you can easily learn to do a variety of high grade welding jobs by following the practical, simplified operating and welding instructions furnished. Once you see a DYNAMIC in operation, you won't want to be without it. Its simplicity will amaze you. In a year the DYNAMIC only costs you about a day. Helmet, rods, cables, holder and operating instructions, etc., furnished.

SAVES YOU VALUABLE TIME AND MONEY!

This portable DYNAMIC WELDER—easily carried to the job—can be operated from any convenient, properly wired 110 volt, 60 cycle line. Can also be supplied for 220 volt, 60 cycle operation and for other voltages and cycles at slight additional cost. Works on IRON, STEEL, BRASS, BRONZE, AND OTHER METALS—has 8 metallic and carbon arc welding heat stages—does work you would think only possible with larger more expensive machine.

DYNAMIC WELDER CO. • 13 East 23rd St., NH, Chicago 16, Ill.

WRITE TODAY FOR PARTICULARS
Get details on our 10 day trial offer

Member Chicago Association of Commerce



Labels on the left: FARM IMPLEMENTS, BICYCLE REPAIRS, HOME APPLIANCES, SHOP WORK, AUTOMOBILE REPAIRS

How to Start YOUR OWN BUSINESS

Amazing Postwar Development Now Gives
You the Opportunity to Make Money Fast!
Starting scientific discovery, just now becoming available for general use, will enable you to start your business and reap great profits! Plastics, one of the most revolutionizing and rapidly expanding industries, offers a great opportunity to all enterprising men and women. This is one of the few industries in which home manufacturers thrive and prosper. You can start even on a spare time basis in your own home, and expand rapidly into a full time business, paying good profits.

LIQUID MARBLE
Make **LIQUID MARBLE** the amazing Plastic, with a thousand uses. **LIQUID MARBLE** can be poured into **FLEXIBLE MOLDS** for casting all kinds of artistic and serviceable articles such as: ornaments, novelties, desk sets, paper weights, book-ends, souvenirs, statuary, toys, etc.

FLEXIBLE MOLDS
Make your own **FLEXIBLE MOLDS**. The cost is low—in fact, a large sized mold costs but a few cents. Hundreds of casts can be taken from a single mold.

NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED!
No skill or previous knowledge is necessary. All you do is follow our easy-to-understand instructions.

UNLIMITED MARKET
The market is literally unlimited. You will find steady year-round demand in your own community. Your product will not be in selling but in supplying the huge pent-up demand. Moreover, we supply you with names of big buyers for your finished products.

WRITE TODAY
Bing Products will show you how to start with a small investment and build a permanent, independent, profitable business! Don't fail to grasp this opportunity! Write today for **FREE CATALOG**.

BING PRODUCTS

Dept. M1, 88 Broad Street, BOSTON 10, MASS.

MAKE BIG WAGES IN WELDING

Learn welding in all its phases in modern welding school. Experienced welder-instructors, individual instruction. Qualified under G. I. Bill. Write for **FREE booklet**.

HOBART TRADE SCHOOL, BOX G-27, TROY, OHIO

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure booklet containing information concerning patent protection and procedure—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

726-A District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

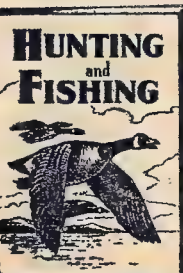
Learn to MOUNT BIRDS

Tan SKINS, Make Up FURS
Be a Taxidermist. We teach you at home. Mount Birds, Animals, Pets, Game Heads, Fish. Save your hunting trophies; decorate home and den. **MAKE MONEY**. Mount and Embroider for others. Big spare-time profit.

FREE BOOK 100 game pictures 68 pages - 80 pictures. Send post card **TODAY**. State your **AGE**. **NORTHWEST SCHOOL OF TAXIDERM** Dept. 3362 Omaha, Nebraska

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 to 50—Many Swedish Massage graduates make \$30, \$75 or even more per week. Larger full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book **FREE NOW!** The College of Swedish Massage Dept. 795B, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11



HUNTING & FISHING

is a monthly magazine crammed full of hunting, fishing, camping, dog and boating stories and pictures, invaluable information about guns, fishing tackle, game law changes, best places to fish and hunt—countless ideas that will add more fun to your days afield.

Special Trial Offer

Send 25c in stamps or coin and we will send you **Hunting & Fishing** for six months.

HUNTING & FISHING

MAGAZINE, 250 Sportsman's Bldg., Boston, Mass.

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 107)

Obadiah heard Scarface working round behind him. The blackness was paling ever so little. Ten yards away, Soapy's pony was an indistinct blob. But Nason and Scarface were still beyond his vision.

So he would be beyond theirs. With his lean frame hugging the ground, Obadiah began working backwards toward the pony. Grim resolution possessed him. He weighed the two rannies in the balance against the welfare of the nesters and their cattle's lives and found them wanting.

He intended to down them as he would a lobo that was stalking an unguarded calf. There was a good chance that he would die himself, but he didn't pray. He wasn't afraid of death.

He stopped crawling. It was getting too light. He came to a knee, with .45 leveled. He faced the well, at right angles to the tensed Nason and his gunny.

They were ready. In another second—"Now! Let's get him!" snarled Nason.

Instantly they came charging in. Their guns were roaring. The explosions lighted the scene with a pulsing glare that increased as they neared each other.

Five yards from the well they slowed. Then Obadiah's first slug drilled Scarface sideways through the chest and the gunny spread-eagled on the ground and clawed convulsively.

Nason swung and fired at Obadiah's gun-flash. The preacher heard it smash into the dead pony behind him. He loosed powder again.

Nason cursed. Then he dropped his gun that Obadiah's slug had smashed from his numbed hand. He turned, to lumber fast away in the darkness.

Obadiah fired again . . . and knew he'd missed. Then he smiled grimly. The Lord was delivering the wicked into his hand.

Nason was fumbling with the tethered Stonewall's tie rope! Obadiah levered up and ran forward as the big man started to swing up on the stallion's back. His seat touched saddle once, then he went flying out into the darkness. Obadiah was there to welcome him with bare knuckles. But Nason was as full of fight as a cornered bobcat. He came scrambling up and met Obadiah with hammering fists. Now it was man to man, with no gun help.

Nason cursed and foamed, but Obadiah slugged it out with clenched jaws. The two were well matched. Obadiah had the height, although Nason outweighed him by twenty pounds. But the preacher made that lardy belly pay him dividends by driving steaming hooks to the other's midriff.

The Pistol Preachment of Obadiah Jones

Obadiah felt the blood from his mashed nose dribbling down over his lips and felt his right eye closing. Then he caught Nason an overhanded smash that drove the big man down on his haunches. Nason ducked under his following swing and clinched.

They wrestled furiously, butting and heeling and slugging madly. Then Nason felt his wind going and tried to break away. Obadiah clung to him grimly.

Then Nason did a foolish thing. With his free hand he raked down Obadiah's craggy face with his nails and his clenching fingers closed on the minister's flaming red beard.

He yanked viciously. A yelp was wrung from Obadiah's lips. Unthinking, he hearkened back to his campaign days and cursed Nason lustily.

Then, in righteous anger, his great corded arms swung around behind Nason's back and he squeezed prodigiously. The man's ribs were near popping when he screamed and collapsed on the ground.

When the returning homesteaders came spurring up, he had Nason pinned solidly to the ground. Somebody discovered that Soapy had only been stunned when his horse went down. While willing hands trussed the cursing Nason, others carried the saloon keeper close to the well.

"If we had water," somebody said, "we'd bring him around. 'Who'll go for it?'"

"No need," Obadiah replied. "Look!"

A little dome of water was crowding up over the open top of the driven pipe. A few drops spilled over and ran down it. Faster and faster they spilled out as the clogged holes in the pipe, deep down in the water sands, cleared. Then it was gushing out in a steady torrent of cool, sweet water.

Obadiah poured some of the water over the reviving saloon man's face. "Soapy," he said, "have one on the Lord."

NEW MIDGET ELECTRIC ARC WELDER

**FULLY
GUARANTEED**

**RETAILS
ONLY
\$3.95**



**Plugs into Light
Socket AC or DC**

It's new! It's handy! It's efficient! Use the Midget Electric Arc Welder for hundreds of light-metal jobs. Does comparable welding work with a 1/16 inch welding rod on thin metal as that of larger and higher priced welders. Operates on 15 ampere fuses, 110 volt 60 cycle A.C. or D.C. current, by use of our special standard-coated 1/16-inch welding rods. Generous supply of rods supplied with machine. Recommended for all light welding jobs: automobile fenders, etc. Take the Midget Arc anywhere to the job. Sturdily built and fully guaranteed. Comes complete—ready to use. Nothing else to buy. No previous welding experience needed to strike an arc. In a short time, anyone mechanically inclined can learn to weld with this machine. You'll find hundreds of money-saving, time-saving uses for the Midget Arc around your home, garage, or workshop. Also in garages, factories, repair shops, tin shops, mechanics, farmers, inventors, etc. Order a Midget Electric Arc Welder now! **SEND NO MONEY.** We'll rush one to you, complete with rods and helmet (equipped with APPROVED welding glass). Pay postman only \$3.95 plus postage charges. If not satisfied, return Midget Arc in 5 days from receipt and we'll refund your money immediately. **RUSH YOUR ORDER NOW.**

MIDGET ARC WELDER CO., Strader Ave., Dept. S-228, Cincinnati 26, Ohio

JOBS NOT BOMBS for AMERICANS

RAILWAY POSTAL CLERK
MAIL CARRIER
POST OFFICE CLERK
MANY OTHERS

WORK FOR "UNCLE SAM"

START

\$1756 to \$3021 Year

Men—Women

Prepare Now for 1947
Examinations.
Volunteers Get
Special Privileges.
Mail Coupon
Today

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. D-29, Rochester 4, N. Y.

Write: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of many U. S. Government Big Pay Jobs. (2) Tell me how to prepare for one of these jobs.

Name _____
Address _____

Get?

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits

poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills,



AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL



SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of Six Big Auto Books, 20th Edition. Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this **FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.**

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the **FIFTY INDEX** to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon **TODAY.**

[A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge.]

Vocational Publishers Since 1898

CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step **HOW** to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

6 BIG VOLUMES
2800 pages, 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Diesel Engines. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A231

Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.

I would like to examine your Six-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you \$2 and pay the balance at the rate of only \$3 a month until \$24.80 has been paid. Please include consulting service as offered above.

Name
Address
City
State

Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

Now for EVERY WORK SHOP! NEW Invention Electroplates by BRUSH



Easy to Plate CHROMIUM GOLD, SILVER, NICKEL, COPPER

... For Pleasure and Profit!

If you have a workshop—at home or in business—you need this new Warner Electroplater. At the stroke of an electrified brush, you can electroplate models and projects—you can replate worn articles, faucets, tools, fixtures, silverware, etc. with a durable, sparkling coat of metal... Gold, Silver, Chromium, Nickel, Copper or Cadmium. Method is easy, simple, quick. Everything furnished—equipment complete, ready for use. By doing a bit of work for others, your machine can pay for itself within a week. So make your shop complete by getting a Warner Electroplater right away. Send today for **FREE SAMPLE** and illustrated literature. **ACT AT ONCE! Mail Coupon.**
WARNER ELECTRIC CO., DEPT. L-20
1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Ill.

FREE Details & Sample!

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., 1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Dept. L-20
Gentlemen: Send Free Sample and Details to:

Name
Address
City State



ROUND-UP

A CROSS the dusty prairie where once Indian and buffalo roamed at will, the combine and the tractor now clack their way. The trails that were once dimly marked tracks through the wilderness are now concrete arrows along which modern vehicles stream in never-ending lines. The rustlers and outlaws who once pounded their reckless way with ready guns, stolen stock and bloodstained gold are but a fast-fading memory before the streamlined roadsters and motorcycles of state and county law-enforcement officers. And the wild longhorn, whose ornery spirit stampeded many a trail drive, has been replaced by a more placid but beefier descendant.

The West our grandfathers knew is gone, never to return.

The glorious tradition of the West, however, remains unchanged. It is still vibrantly alive, yet it has been set in a pattern where it cannot be touched by the passage of time. It is to this mission that the editors of *Big-Book Western Magazine* have pledged themselves: to preserve, in the living mold of literature, one of the greatest historical epics of our nation.

The buckskin man and the hide hunter have gone the way of the Sharps rifle and the buffalo. The crack of the range-war rifle no longer sounds over the prairie. The trail herds now ride in the cattle car. But in the pages of *Big-Book Western* a man can still hear the thunder of the buffalo herd echoing in the earth. The Indian scout's rifle still booms its message of death. The gaudy lights of Tombstone and Silver City once again flare in the tinsel dance halls, and the rattle of chips and the rhythmic scrape of fiddles and pianos fills the night.

Yes, each month we try to make all the drama and color of the Old West come alive again in the pages of this magazine. Next month's issue features stories by such writers of the frontier as Harry F. Olmstead, Stone Cody, James Shaffer, Gunnison Steele, plus others who know and love the rugged men who blazed the trail for us, in a later, softer, time to follow.

The March issue will be published January 17th.

—THE EDITOR

HOLLYWOOD'S TEN MOST BEAUTIFUL BRUNETTES

... All with motives for Murder!

"ONE OF THESE
BABES SAW THE
SONGWRITER KILLED...
WHEN I FIND HER,
SHE'S GOING TO
SING!"

RKO
PRESENTS

GEORGE RAFT · LYNN BARI

in

NOCTURNE

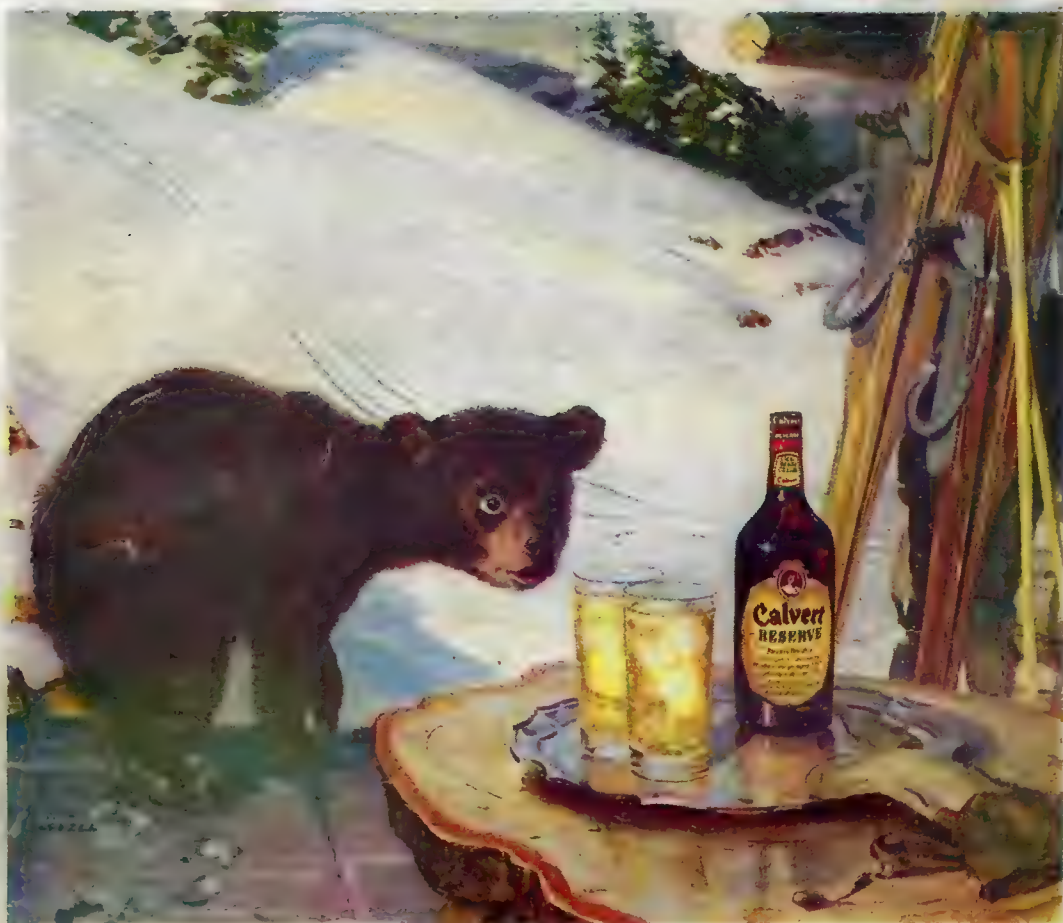
with

VIRGINIA HUSTON · JOSEPH PEVNEY
MYRNA DELL



Produced by JOAN HARRISON
Directed by EDWIN L. MARIN
Screen Play by JONATHAN LATIMER





"Hmm—more smart people making tracks for Calvert!"

The sensible trend's to Calvert! Sensible...
because it's the "whiskey of moderation"...blessed with
friendly lightness...congenial taste...all-around
whiskey agreeableness. We suggest you try it. Then you,
too, will understand why...

Clear Heads Choose Calvert

Calvert

BLENDED WHISKIES

Reserve **OR** *Special*

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits...Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits



WHY THOUSANDS SAY...



"It's Lee 6 to 1"

Lee Leadership is built on many sound, proven facts.

The Lee Guarantee... Your Lee garment must look better, fit better, and wear longer than any other you have ever worn, or you can have a new pair free or your money back.

Lee Tailored Sizes... A perfect fit for every build... tall, short, slim, or stout.

Famous Lee Jelt Denim... Made of selected long-fiber cotton and woven into tough, long wearing denim.

Exclusive Lee Fabrics...

Smart colors in really tough, handsome materials.

Fadeproof Fabrics... Many of the exclusive Lee fabrics are vat dyed and fadeproof.

Sanforized... Shrinkage guaranteed less than one per cent.

That's why Lee won first place in a nation-wide survey* among working men on the question: "What brand of overalls do you prefer?" *Lee Jelt Denim Overalls* led the next brand by a margin of 6 to 1!

Buy Lee work clothes... at leading stores coast-to-coast.

*Survey made by a prominent publishing company.

THERE'S A LEE FOR EVERY JOB!

JELT DENIM OVERALLS • UNION ALLS • MATCHED SHIRTS AND PANTS
DUNGAREES • COWBOY PANTS



COPYRIGHT 1947
THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.
Kansas City, Mo. • Minneapolis, Minn.
Trenton, N. J. • San Francisco, Calif.
South Bend, Ind. • Salina, Kansas

WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

HERB'S ARROW HIT THE MARK AND THEN...

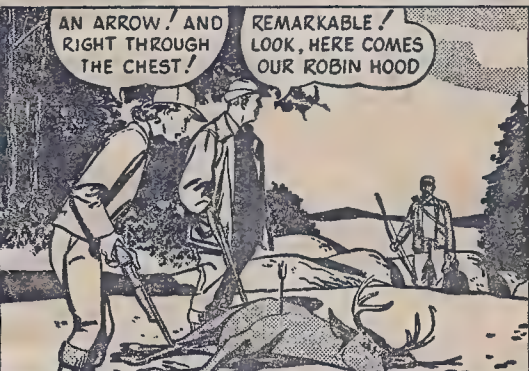
W-W-W-HY, DAD!
HE DROPPED
AND I DIDN'T
EVEN SHOOT!



NOBODY SHOT!
IT'S FANTASTIC!

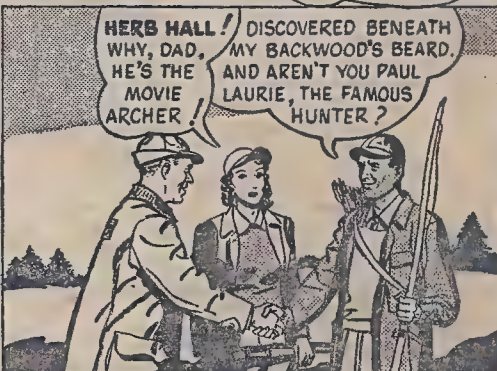
AN ARROW, / AND
RIGHT THROUGH
THE CHEST!

REMARKABLE!
LOOK, HERE COMES
OUR ROBIN HOOD



HERB HALL!
WHY, DAD,
HE'S THE
MOVIE
ARCHER!

DISCOVERED BENEATH
MY BACKWOOD'S BEARD.
AND AREN'T YOU PAUL
LAURIE, THE FAMOUS
HUNTER?



THANKS FOR THE
LIFT WITH THAT
BUCK. MAY I DRIVE
YOU TO YOUR CAMP?

FINE! AND SAY...
IT'S NEAR DINNER
TIME. WHY NOT
JOIN US?

I'D LIKE TO SHAVE
BEFORE WE EAT
BUT HAVEN'T A
RAZOR IN MY CAR

COME ALONG
AND USE
MINE

THIS IS THE BLADE
FOR ME! SLICKEST
SHAVE I'VE
EVER HAD

LOTS OF MY
FRIENDS USE
THIN GILLETTES.
THEY'RE MIGHTY EASY
ON YOUR FACE



SO NEXT WEEK WE
HOP TO ALASKA
FOR GIANT MOOSE.
LIKE TO COME
ALONG?

WOULD I!
AND HOW!

WONDERFUL...
HE'S KEEN

TAKE ALONG
SOME THIN
GILLETTES,
PAL



YOU LOOK AND FEEL RIGHT ON THE BEAM
WHEN YOU SHAVE WITH THIN GILLETTES.
THEY'RE THE SHARPEST, LONGEST-LASTING
BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. WHAT'S MORE
... AND THIS IS IMPORTANT... THEY FIT YOUR
GILLETTE RAZOR PERFECTLY, PROTECTING YOU
FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT
BLADES AND FAULTY SHAVING
METHODS. ASK FOR THIN
GILLETES



THREE COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVELS

25¢ **BIG-BOOK** **WESTERN**



ALL STORIES NEW

MAGAZINE

NO SERIALS!

Vol. 19, No. 4

CONTENTS

February, 1947

(Three Big Book-Length Novels)

GUN-KINGS OF HORSETHIEF CROSSING!.....WALT COBURN 8

The only heritage those riders of the twisted trails, Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth, could leave their owlhoot-sired sons was an honest outfit—built on a foundation of Vigilante corpses!

FOR BULLETS, BEANS, AND A BOOTHILL GRAVE!..W. HEUMAN 58

Cowpoke Ed McLain issued a grim gunsmoke invitation to his graze-hungry, river-raiding neighbor: "Sheeper, come and get your needin's!"

BUSHWHACK DAY AT BUCKSKIN RIVER..... TOM ROAN 108

Only the lethal-magic in Sam Easy's gun lay between that little cowtown and a cattle pool invasion that spelled red death!

(Two Smashing Novelettes)

OWLHOOT LAWMAN'S LAST WAR.....ED EARL REPP 40

The debt that Sheriff Dave Gray owed would be paid only when that quick-trigger badge-toter delivered to stern frontier law its rightful due—the corpse of his reckless brother!

FREE GRASS—FREE COFFINS.....WILLIAM R. COX 82

What price could Red Chandor pay for a free range in that graze-grabbing country when the coin of a man's blood and courage could buy only a six-by-two boothill plot?

(Six Gripping Short Stories)

DEAD MEN LEAVE NO TRAIL!.....MARVIN J. JONES 29

BIG EFF'S PEACEFUL BATTLE CALL.....RUEL McDANIEL 35

SODBUSTERS WANTED—DEAD!.....FRANK MORRIS 52

OLD LAWDOGS NEVER DIE.....WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER 76

LAST TALLY.....GUNNISON STEELE 97

THE PISTOL PREACHMENT OF OBADIAH JONES...G. C. OGLE 100

(Two Western Features)

FRONTIER ODDITIES.....ROBBINS AND WAGGENER 6

ROUND-UP.....THE EDITOR 130

NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED JANUARY 17, 1947

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 13, 1945, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1946, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$3.00; other countries \$7.75 additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

SCHOOL for VETERANS!

Learn while you earn!

You're in a class
by yourself with
I.C.S.—and Courses
are free to you
under the G.I. Bill
of Rights!



• I. C. S. Courses, paid for by the Government, are now available to honorably discharged World War II Veterans. And the Government's investment in your training will NOT be deducted from any future bonus.

• Get started now on your studies for success in business or industry! With I. C. S. you can do this in your spare time *while holding down a job!* You're in a class by yourself. There's no one to

hold you back . . . you progress just as fast as your abilities and ambition permit!

• Courses cover more than 400 commercial and technical subjects—many listed below. Check the subject that interests you—or write it in. We'll send you full information on the Course—and complete instructions on how to enroll with us under the G.I. Bill of Rights. Act now!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS



BOX 3280-W, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses

- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses

- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses

- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting

Structural Engineering

- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses

- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses

- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses

- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses

- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals

Industrial Engineering

- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses

- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses

- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses

- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses

- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name _____ Age _____ Home _____

City _____ State _____ Present Position _____

Working Hours _____ A.M. to _____ P.M. Length of Service in World War II _____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Enrollment under the G.I. Bill of Rights approved for War II Veterans. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

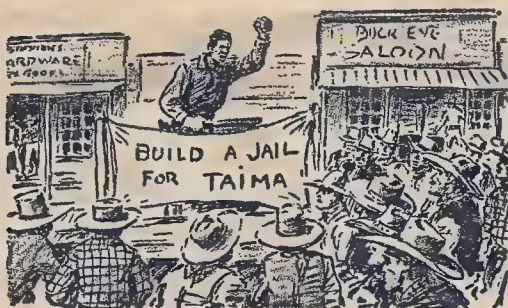
FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



← Holed up at Fort Benton for the winter, trapper Jeed Smithson and three friends dealt themselves a hand in the popular new card game, poker. To make things more interesting, they began to build a kitty to be claimed by the first man to hold a royal flush. Enthusiastically, they played all season and when they left, turned over their hands to four newcomers. Fifty-seven years later, the same game was going strong, the kitty still unclaimed. Finally, in 1872, this great marathon poker game was ended when a professional gambler named Roger Stark drew an all black hand, ace-high, and took the kitty—now a full grown cat—amounting to \$71,000.

One of the oddest professions of the Old West was the career of bootblack Michael Spiven of hell-roaring Virginia City. He took great pride in his work, for he was no ordinary shoe-shine boy. Alive, Virginia City citizens cared little for stylishly-buffed leather, but dead they had no choice in the matter, and Spiven made a good living just polishing the boots of the men who died with their boots on. When Spiven himself was killed in a gun battle, there was no one who knew how to wield his brush and cloth. But the miners, knowing how he would have felt about it, tenderly removed the bootblack's muddy shoes and lowered him into a Boothill fighter's grave—barefooted.



← Elliot Crane, civic-minded citizen of Taima, Montana, thought it was a disgrace that this up-and-coming little frontier town possessed no jail. For a year, he pleaded with the reluctant populace, argued with the city fathers and campaigned on the platform of "build a jail for Taima." At last, Crane won his case. A tax bill was passed and a stout new prison was constructed, having walls three feet thick and iron bars the size of a man's arm. Shortly after it opened for business, the Taima jail had its first prisoner, arrested on a charge of drunken disorderliness: it was Elliot Crane.

The shambling, age-wrecked figure of Bard McDowell was beloved and familiar in the streets of Santa Fe, but no one really believed him when he claimed to be 140 years old. When the citizens joshed him, "Tell us about Valley Forge," the old-timer would spin a lurid, breathless story of Western-style bushwhack warfare as it was fought in Old New England. Finally, in 1877, the oldster died. Buried with him was a yellowed document sorrowing strangers found tacked to the wall: an honorable discharge to Bard McDowell, from the Continental Army of the United States—and General George Washington!

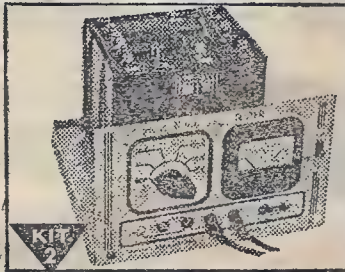


I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

**I Send You
6 Big Kits
of Radio Parts**



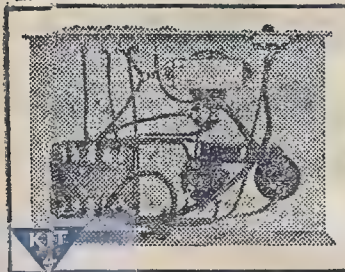
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO—Win Success I Will Train You at Home—SAMPLE LESSON FREE

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio," both FREE. See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with 6 BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

Many Beginners Soon Make Extra Money in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while still learning! It's probably easier to get started now than ever before, because the Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also

find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even greater opportunities as Television, FM, and Electronic devices become available to the public! Send for FREE books now!

Find Out What NRI Can Do for You

Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my

FREE 64-page book. Read the details about my Course; letters from men I trained; see how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just MAIL COUPON NOW in envelope or paste on penny postal, J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7BS9, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

Approved for Training under GI Bill

Good for Both—FREE

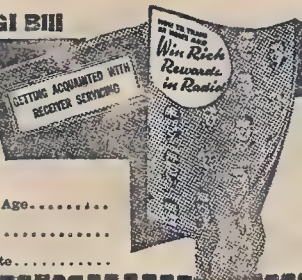
MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7BS9
National Radio Institute
Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE, your sample lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... Zone... State.....



My Course Includes Training in
TELEVISION * ELECTRONICS

GUN-KINGS OF HORSETHIEF CROSSING!



Tom Blue's voice had a sharp edge. "Me'n my pardner are just spooked enough to shoot. Turn 'em loose!"

A cottonwood tree and quick Vigilante justice waited for Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth. But before those riders of the twisted trails did the dead man's prance, they must live long enough to make one last desperate deal for a game pair of owlhoot-branded youngsters: the building of an honest outfit on the corpse of a hooded, night-riding killer-king!

Chapter I

RED MAN'S MEDICINE

PETE FARNSWORTH was sixteen years old when he came with his father, Hugh Farnsworth, to the abandoned ranch at the mouth of Hell Creek on the Missouri River in Montana. Pete was small-boned and undersized for his age. He was also tow-headed and his eyes were sky blue and his nose was short and his mouth too wide and he had a short blunt jaw.

Pete's undersized stature bothered Hugh Farnsworth, and it cropped out when the man got drunker than usual.

"I can't recall a runt in the Farnsworth family. Regarding your mother's line of ancestry, I can say. I married a nobody—no pedigree."

Hugh Farnsworth was a remittance man. A black sheep, he called himself. Blackleg was the name some of the cowmen had for



Smashing Saga of Vigilante Hangrope Justice!

By **WALT COBURN**



him. He'd been kicked out of the Northwest Mounted and drifted down across the Canadian border. A big-boned, yellow-haired man was Farnsworth, with a capacity for whiskey and a pair of hard-hitting fists and a sarcastic tongue. He was a gambler who never won. Always in debt and therefore willing to pick up a dishonest dollar if it didn't require too much actual work, the danger or illegality of a deal bothered Hugh Farnsworth not at all. Drunk or sober, the man was fearless. And drunk, he was brutal and abusive and ruthless.

Pete feared and sometimes hated his father. He tried not to cringe under the caustic tongue lashings he got when he made a mistake. He hated the man whenever he remembered dimly how his mother had stood his father's drunken abuse. Hugh Farnsworth never laid hand in anger on his wife or son. He had no need to because his tongue was a deadlier weapon. And well he knew its punishing power.

Pete was a little thankful and glad when his mother died. She believed in God and a Heaven where there was peace. Pete was ten years old when she kissed him goodbye and died. Pete had her decently buried by the time his father got back from his two week's drunk in town. A delegation of ranchers in the Cypress Hills had told Hugh Farnsworth that Canada was too small, vast as its Dominion might be, to hold such a blackleg. They had paid him a fair price for his ranch in cash money. Hugh Farnsworth had taken his son Peter and drifted into Montana.

While drifting from one cowtown or mining camp to the next, gambling, turning a crooked deal here or there, mixing with gamblers, road agents, horse thieves and cattle rustlers, Hugh Farnsworth would board Pete out to some family or hire the boy out to a livery barn man or rancher and pick him up in a few weeks or months. Then he would drift on. More than once the law let Hugh Farnsworth off because he had a motherless son to support and look after.

IT WAS after dark when Hugh Farnsworth and Pete shoved a bunch of fifty head of stolen horses down through the strip of badlands to the deserted ranch at the mouth of Hell Creek. A week's supply of grub and their bed-rolls were on pack horses. There was a log cabin and barn and pole corral that were badly in need of repair. Hugh Farnsworth's jug was going empty.

There was a saloon at the Rocky Point Crossing. Hugo Farnsworth told Pete to hold down the place till he got back from Rocky Point. He told him also to clean out the cabin and chink and daub the logs, and keep an eye on the horses. If anybody showed up Pete was to act as stupid as he looked. He pulled out at sunrise, leaving the boy alone.

Young Pete Farnsworth didn't mind being left alone. On the contrary, he welcomed it. It was June and the giant cottonwoods were in full green leaf and there was the smell of wild roses and river mud. A meadowlark warbled its sunrise song. When Hugh Farnsworth had ridden away, young Pete went on foot down to the river bank and walked out onto a long wide sandbar. He skinned off his clothes and waded into the shallow water, naked, with a bar of strong-smelling yellow soap to scrub the dried sweat and dirt off. He was lathering himself when a voice from across the river hailed him.

"Hey, kid!" It was a young voice. "What you doin' in my river?"

The strong yellow soap was in Pete's eyes and he knuckled it out. When he could see he made out a tall boy in faded blue shirt and old overalls riding bareback, watering a little bunch of horses on the sandbar on the south

bank. It struck Pete that the boy looked lonely.

"Who sold you the Missouri River?" Pete shouted across the water.

"Swim over here and I'll show you."

"I can't swim!" Pete let it slip out before he thought.

"Anybody kin swim. You're scared, that's all. You're a coward!"

Hugh Farnsworth was always accusing Pete of being a coward, afraid of everything.

"I suppose," Hugh Farnsworth would size up his son's undersized stature, "I might make a jockey out of you. If you weren't a coward around a horse."

Pete Farnsworth looked out across the Missouri River. It was the first time he had actually looked far across it and it seemed miles wide. He'd crossed Milk River on horseback, swum it on the back of a good swimming-horse. He'd dog-paddled in a few creeks where he could touch bottom. He looked out across the swift wide current and shivered. He was knee deep and the water felt suddenly cold. He reckoned he would drown out there.

The tall boy had slid off his horse and was peeling off his clothes. His taunting challenge came across the river to Pete's soap filled ears.

"I'll swim out half way and meet you and when I'm done holdin' you under, you'll know it's my river."

The boy across the river had his clothes off. He looked tall and slim and brown-skinned like an Injun. Then he was in the water and swimming, his head a round black lump, his long brown arms moving in easy swift overhand strokes as he angled downstream with the current, swimming fast and easily.

"Coward!"

Pete Farnsworth waded in deeper up to his belly, up to his armpits. Then the current pulled his feet out from under him and he was flailing the water with both arms and kicking his feet. He gasped and choked and the water gagged him and he coughed before he got his mouth shut. Panic and the fear of drowning filled him and he fought the water with a furious desperation that winded him. There was an undercurrent dragging at him and he tried to touch bottom and couldn't. He knew he was going to drown and he didn't want to drown. He wanted to live. He sobbed and choked and gasped for breath while the swift treacherous current pulled his head under and he was smothering underneath its terrible weight. His lungs were bursting and he was dizzy and everything went black and he knew he was drowning.

Pete Farnsworth was vomiting water when he came alive. He lay limp on his belly across a big cottonwood log. Somebody astraddle his back was squeezing and pumping water out of him. Sick and shivering and half-drowned as he was, young Pete Farnsworth could hear

the sound of that same voice that had taunted him from across the river. Only now there was no malice or taunting in its sound. Only a sort of contrition and fear.

"..... gosh sakes I thought everybody kin swim—like animals. You must've swallered fifty gallons. You went under so deep I had to dive to git you. You wasn't lyin' when you said you couldn't swim. You ain't a coward. Gosh sakes, don't die on me, kid."

After a while Pete could sit up on the sand. But he kept shivering. The boy had fetched a red Hudson's Bay blanket from Pete's bed-roll and had it wrapped around Pete's shivering naked body.

The boy was tall and slim and his skin was tanned a dark brown all over. He had coarse, straight black hair like an Injun's but his eyes were dark smoky gray. His face was lean and his teeth were the whitest Pete had ever seen.

"I'm Tom Blue—Buck Blue's kid. I guess you've heard about Buck Blue. Buck Blue and Jim Bridger and Liver-Eatin' Johnson—Buckskin scouts. Buck Blue's a squawman like Jim Bridger. I'm a half-blood Sioux and proud of it. I've seen the Sioux dance their sundance. I'm seventeen. How old are you?"

"Sixteen." Pete's jaws ached from clamping shut his chattering teeth. "I'm a runt."

"What's your name?"

"Farnsworth—Pete Farnsworth."

"You're kinda runty, all right." Tom Blue's teeth showed in a grin. His smoky gray eyes almost twinkled. "When I git a catfish under five pounds on my trotline, I throw 'im back in the river. Mebbyso I shoulda throwed you back in."

Pete looked at his undersized body. His white skin looked pale, blueish tinged from the cold. Puny and runty.

"Maybe," said Pete tonelessly, "you shoulda let me drown."

Tom Blue's grin faded. His gray eyes lost their sparkle. He shook his sodden black head.

"No. I was joshin', Pete. You got to get used to my joshin'. I take after Buck Blue. He's a rough joshier. No kid wants to die. Anyhow you can't die now till I tell you because you belong to me. You was drowned and I pumped the water outa you and saved your life. From now on your life belongs to me—till mebbeso some day you save my life. Then that puts us even. But till then you belong to me. I read that in a book so it's got to be so. It was a book called Redskin and Cowboy. I reckon we better take a solemn oath on it—a blood oath. You got a knife in them pants of yours?" The bright sparkle was back in Tom Blue's gray eyes.

Pete nodded. Tom Blue fished in the pockets of Pete's overalls till he found a jackknife. It had two broken smaller blades and the big blade was whetted. Pete stared curiously.

Tom Blue stuck the sharp point of the blade in his own forearm. A trickle of blood showed. He shoved the cut between Pete's blue lips and told him to suck the blood.

Then he took Pete's arm and jabbed the sharp knife point in. Pete hardly felt the pain. The half-breed boy sucked the blood from Pete's cut.

"That does it, Pete. Now raise our right hands and swear. From now on Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth are pardners till death. I solemnly swear it." Tom Blue's voice was a vibrant chant. "You repeat it word for word, Pete."

Pete repeated it. Tom and Pete shook hands. The breed boy said that made them blood brothers from now on until death.

THERE on the banks of the Missouri River in Montana a little after sunrise on a July day in the Eighties, was formed a partnership that was to bind together the lives and destinies of Pete Farnsworth, son of Hugh Farnsworth, British remittance man and black-leg scoundrel, and Tom Blue, half-breed son of Buckskin Blue, one time U. S. Government scout and squawman, rancher, cattle rustler.

From across the river a roaring, bellowing voice lifted in song:

"Oh, the Johnson boys they built a mill,

They built it on the side of a hill.

And when it ran it made no noise

Because 'twas built by the Johnson boys!"

A short, powerfully-built man in dirt-glazed, fringed buckskins stood on the sandbar on the south bank of the Missouri River. A saddle carbine rested in the crook of his arm. His long hair and bushy whiskers were fiery red, his voice a terrible bellow.

"May the howlin' wolves never cease!"

The sunlight caught and was reflected on the blued steel of the carbine barrel.

"That's Buckskin Blue," said the tall, slim, half-breed boy. "My old man."

"What ye got in yonder red blanket, Tom?" bellowed Buckskin Blue. "Ye're not yet dry behind the ears. If it's a young red-blanket squaw ye've stole from the Assiniboine squaw camps, ye'll buy her with your own ponies and none of mine. Ye're too damned young to be takin' a squaw. If ye've stole her, ye'll take her back. Let it never be said that Buckskin Blue's only son turned out to be a squaw camp robber!"

Tom Blue's white teeth showed. He walked to the bank and shouted something in Sioux. Pete understood only the name Farnsworth. The name of Farnsworth brought forth a loud and profane bellow from Buckskin Blue.

"That's Johnny Bull!" Buckskin Blue's mighty roar echoed far back into the badlands

behind the Missouri River and the echoes were flung back across the water, "That conniver-in', lyin' son! It's blacklegs like Hugh Farnsworth that give cattle rustlin' an' horse stealin' a hard name. *Wahshstay wahnitch wahseegee kuzsee. . .*"

"Sioux." Tom Blue grinned. "Means that old man of yours is a no good white man."

"Tell that Hugh Farnsworth to come out from his coyote hole!" Buck Blue bellowed his challenge from the south bank of the river. "I've sent him warnin' to stay away from my river. I'll fight that big Johnny Bull scoun'rel any way, shape er fashion he kin name, an' throw in a few didos of my own invention. I'll claw, bite, kick an' gouge with him. Knife fight 'im. Slow-cut with 'im, chunk fer chunk an' whittle the meat off his bones, till the weak man drops in the bloody chunks of his own whittlin's. Or I'll gun-fight the big, yaller-bellied son of a Britisher duke. Or swim him to death, back an' forth acrost the wide Missouri. Trot out your Hugh Farnsworth or I'll swim the river an' smoke him outa his coyote hole with a gun." Buck Blue cursed the Farnsworth name long and loud.

"He ain't here." Pete's shout had a puny sound. "Hugh Farnsworth ain't here. If he was, he'd be acrost that river right now makin' you eat your braggin'."

Pete Farnsworth didn't understand what prompted him to take it up for Hugh Farnsworth. Mostly, he hated his father. But Hugh Farnsworth wasn't here to defend his name against the drunken maligning of that red-whiskered buckskin squawman.

"Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum!

I smell the stink of an Englishman!

I'll ketch him alive or take 'im dead

An' use his brains to butter my bannock bread!"

Over on the wide sandbar Buckskin Blue leaped high in the air, cracked his moccasined heels together and executed a few fancy steps of some Sioux war dance. His carbine was in one hand, his hunting knife in the other.

"When Buckskin Blue kills a man," said Tom Blue, "he scalps 'im. Buck Blue's lifted a lot of scalps."

Buck Blue had sighted some of the stolen horses Hugh Farnsworth had picked up somewhere and with Pete's help had drifted through the badlands and thrown in on the good feed of the Hell Creek Ranch.

"Fetch them ponies acrost here, Tom!" shouted Buck Blue. "Them's ourn. Strayed acrost the river last night. Fetch me them ponies!"

Tom Blue's grin was flat-lipped as the snarl of a young wolf. His smoky gray eyes were gray agate.

"Buck Blue ain't a-foolin'. Them's my or-

ders. I got to take them ponies off you, Pete."

PETE FARNSWORTH had his orders.

Hugh Farnsworth had left him in charge of the stolen horses with orders to not lose a one. He threw aside the red Hudson's Bay blanket and was on his feet. He was still sick and shaky and weak from the near-drowning. But he squared off with doubled fists to block the way of the taller half-breed boy. Both were naked in the sunlight, there on the sandbar.

"You'll have to git past me to reach the horses. You got to kill me to take 'em, Tom."

Tom Blue nodded. He turned around and reached back and pointed to the scars that criss-crossed his slim brown back.

"I tell the 'breed kids I got them from the torture sun dance. But Buck Blue put 'em there with a rawhide quirt. I'm waitin' for the day when I git big enough an' old enough to tie him to a whuppin' post and quirt him to death. Your old man whup you thataway, Pete?"

"Hugh Farnsworth never laid a hand on me." Pete stared at the ugly scars that marked the 'breed boy's slim, brown back. "But when he gits done cursin' me, I'm sicker'n I got from purty near drownin'. Hugh Farnsworth killed my mother with his dirty cursin' tongue. You got to lick the livin' daylight outa me now, Tom, to take them horses away from me. I reckon you'll have to kill me. We better commence fightin'—Buck Blue's a-hollerin' his head off over yonder."

Tom Blue looked down at the smaller boy. "You shore got guts, Pete. It's a good thing you got me for a pardner to kinda look after you. There's tough kids along this river. They'd gang up on a little runt and shore work you over. But they're scared of me. I got the fear whupped into their doggoned 'breed hides. We're pardners—blood brothers. When the sign comes right, we'll run off together. But the sign ain't right, so we got to outfox my old man and your old man. I call it 'takin' a short-cut' on Buck Blue. Sometimes I git away with it. When I don't—" Tom Blue's grin twisted a little. His scarred back finished the unspoken words.

They were both boys in their teens. School-boy age. But both had been grown men in many ways since they were old enough to learn and remember the things taught them by their fathers and their fathers' hardcase companions. They fought with a grown man's tough wisdom and experience against whatever crossed their trails. And there was an understanding between young Pete Farnsworth and young Tom Blue that had been born and quickly matured and was now about to stand the first test. Their eyes met, lighted. They grinned at each other in the complete

understanding that had no need of useless words.

Then Tom Blue walked to the water's edge and tilted his head a little sideways and upward and gave the most perfect imitation humanly possible of a coyote yapping. One lone coyote at night can sound like a whole pack yapping at the moon and that was the way Tom Blue's coyote howling sounded.

The effect was startling. Across the wide river, Buckskin Blue quit his belligerent bellowing. His war dance and blood curdling threats ceased. He turned and moved swiftly and in a moment was lost to sight in the dense willows and underbrush back of the long sandbar.

"That was the danger signal." Tom Blue picked up Pete's clothes and boots and tossed them at him and gathered up the red blanket. "The signal to coyote. Buckskin Blue takes to the brush mighty quick and easy. He argues it ain't bein' cowardly. Cautious, he calls it. He claims it's all that's saved his scalp a thousand and one times when he was buckskin scoutin' for Miles an' Crook and their cavalry. We better make medicine fast, Pete, to back it up. Buck Blue will quirt the hide off my back if I don't prove I got a big reason for that coyote signal."

From back in the broken badlands came the sound of a gun being fired. Pete began counting aloud.

"One. . . . Two. . . . Three. . . . Four. . . . Five. . . ."

A second shot. Pete again counted to five. At the end of the count of five came a third shot.

"That's Hugh Farnsworth." Pete ducked into the brush and picked up the saddle carbine he had cached there when he came to the river to bathe.

Pete pointed the gun at the sky and pulled the trigger. Counted to five and fired again. And after another count of five he fired the third shot.

Tom Blue strutted about, eyes shining. Quickly he took nimble-witted credit.

"I conjure up that strong medicine, Pete. That proves it to Buck Blue that I ain't lyin'. I conjured up Hugh Farnsworth comin'. My medicine is strong. I'm goin' back now. Meet me here at moonrise. We'll make medicine."

Tom Blue's slim, brown body slid into the river. Pete watched him as he angled downstream and across to the far side.

challenges. He always managed to keep bathed and shaved and cleanly clothed, drunk or sober. He came from the old line of Britishers who dressed for dinner in the evening, regardless.

Hugh Farnsworth asked Pete no questions. Perhaps he had heard the far echoes of Buckskin Blue's roaring bellow as he rode along the river trail from Rocky Point Crossing.

He took his saddle gun and walked to the river's edge. The sun was noon high in the cloudless Montana sky. He stood there on the hard-packed sandbar and called out his answer to Buckskin Blue's mighty challenge and his voice was loud enough to carry across the water without losing any of its cold contempt that matched the hard blue of his eyes.

"Come out of the brush, squawman. Show yourself, Buckskin Blue. I'm Hugh Farnsworth and I've located here at the Hell Creek Ranch."

Across the wide Missouri River, the short, burly, buckskin-clad Buck Blue strode out from behind the willows and out onto the sandbar. And the two men stood there in a waiting silence with the river separating them. Their naked gun barrels glinting in the sunlight.

"Name your game, Johnny Bull!" Buckskin Blue's bellowing roar broke the silence that was freighted with distrust and suspicion and perhaps hatred—or a partnership born of hatred.

"I've named it. This checks the bet to you, Blue."

"This is my river, Johnny Bull. I claim the land on both sides of this crossin'."

"A vigilante hangman's rope,"—there was a cold, toneless threat in the voice of Hugh Farnsworth that was far deadlier than the roaring bellow of the squawman—"makes for a lasting quitclaim deed to all you hold."

"By the eternal burnin' hell, you're the man to know the feel of a hard-twist necktie, Farnsworth!"

"We belong to that common brotherhood, Buck Blue, the fraternal order of the damned. We can hang together, you and I, and perhaps forestall the moment when we hang separately. I coin no new saying. It was written long before our time in the Book of Rogues. Fetch your own whiskey across. You and I have a deal to make."

Hugh Farnsworth turned his big back on the river and the red-whiskered squawman on the far bank, and strode back to his cabin.

Pete had a campfire built. Strong black coffee was simmering and the dutch oven was cooking. Pete's sky-blue eyes watched his big, red-faced, yellow-haired father. Hugh Farnsworth was a handsome man, straight-backed as a British cavalry officer on foot. His hard, cold blue eyes undimmed by whiskey, the bit-

Chapter II

BUCKSKIN BLUE'S CHALLENGE

COWARDICE was not listed among the faults and shortcomings of big Hugh Farnsworth. Nor was he a man who roared

terness that warped his heart and festered inside his brain showed only in the hard, thin line of his mouth. Something far back along his forty years of life had damned the man and burned its black brand deep inside where the hurt was hidden from the world he eyed with bitter cold contempt. No man knew what had turned the younger son of a proud old British line into the blackleg scoundrel Hugh Farnsworth had become. He was not a man to parade his emotions.

Hugh Farnsworth was sober now. He was drinking his second tin cup of the strong black coffee when Tom Blue rowed his father Buckskin Blue across the river. The short, burly, long-maned red-whiskered squawman strode to the cabin with a carbine in the crook of his arm and a gallon crock of whiskey dangling by a rawhide loop from his thick wrist. Buck Blue's eyes, green as bottle glass and as hard, were set under ragged red brows. Barrel-chested, bowlegged, he moved with a quick short stride. For all his compact bulk, Buck Blue was as swift moving as a dwarfed grizzly.

He halted in his moccasin tracks. His buckskins stank of the animal musk and old campfire smoke and tobacco mixed with the kinnikinick that he smoked in a short-stemmed pipe of red Indian pipestone.

Shorter by a head than the giant Britisher, he did not seem to need to look up to meet the cold blue eyes of Hugh Farnsworth. A trick of his short, thick neck thrust his shaggy head forward.

"So our trails finally crossed, eh, Johnny Bull?" Buck Blue's voice was a rumbling growl. His green eyes glittered wickedly.

"The destiny that shapes the ends of the damned, squawman. I have need of a river crossing. I'll test it with those horses I picked up. If the crossing proves safe—" Hugh Farnsworth let the rest of the unfinished sentence hang.

"It's a gravel crossin' for the Johnson Boys." Buck Blue's eyes were slivers of green glass. "But you ain't one of the Johnson Boys. Not from what I hear from the rustlin' of the leaves along the dim trails. For a man who ain't one of the Johnson boys, mister, this river crossin' is boggy. You drop plumb outa sight and you're gone forever."

Pete caught Tom Blue's eyes and sidled around the two men, joining the half-breed boy who was dressed now in a faded old blue shirt, overalls, moccasins and an old black Stetson hat.

"Keep your stench," Hugh Farnsworth said tonelessly, "down wind, Buck Blue. It's offending to a man's nostrils. While we're on the subject of foul odors, I passed by an old cottonwood tree recently where the Vigilantes had left three of the Johnson boys hanging.

I pass along the news for what it might be worth. . . ."

THE big Britisher's eyes held the eyes of the red-whiskered squawman until the slitted green eyes slid away. Buckskin Blue twisted the cork from his jug, tilted it across his upper arm and drank the potent forty-rod whiskey as if it were a drink of cold water needed by a man become suddenly thirsty.

Buck Blue tamped the driftwood stub back in the neck of the brown jug. His voice growled menacingly.

"By the eternal fires of Hell, Farnsworth, if you had a double-crossin' hand in their Vigilante lynchin', you'll soon be wishin' you'd been born dead. The Johnson boys is stronger than the damned Vigilantes."

"Don't waste your threats on me." Hugh Farnsworth smiled thinly.

He looked past the burly squawman to size up Buckskin Blue's half-breed son with something not unlike faint approval.

"That's my boy Tom. Tom Blue." Pride crept into Buck Blue's growl. "Best riverman that ever slid a bunch of horses across the Missouri by the dark of the moon. It's the Injun in him. That's a likely lookin' boy you got. Small, meebby. But he'll do to take along. I know what it is to be undersized. The kickin' around a runt has to take makes him or it breaks him. And if it makes him, then he's a mighty man. He'll be a better man than Hugh Farnsworth ever was, or ever could have been. Take a good look at that pair of young 'uns, Farnsworth. Take a long, good look. And mark this down in your renegade book. If ever there comes a time when this river crossin' gits bad, I'm sendin' that son of mine, Tom, down the one-way trail away from here. And that boy of yourn goes with Tom Blue. And I'll kill you, Farnsworth, like I'd kill a mad dog, if you lift a hand to stop them boys from pullin' out. Drink on that, Johnny Bull, or we'll tangle here an' now."

Hugh Farnsworth looked hard and long into the glittering green eyes of Buckskin Blue. Then he reached down and lifted his wicker-covered demijohn from the ground, pulled the cork with his teeth and spat it out. He lifted the demijohn and Buck Blue lifted his brown jug and Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue drank their first drink together.

Jug and demijohn were never corked until the contents had been drunk. The two men squatted there on the bank of the Missouri and drank—drink for drink—until sundown and moonrise and on through the July Montana night. They drank and smoked and talked. And when the sun rose over the ragged skyline of the Montana badlands, Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue stripped down to

their belts and fought—without rules and no holds barred. Like two savage, brute beasts. Had there been men to witness and carry away the story of that fight it would have become a saga to be told and retold and sung wherever hard men gather by the light of campfires or in frontier saloons or log cabin bunkhouses where tales of fabulous deeds are recounted.

But there were only two boys to watch. Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue. They stayed hidden back in the brush and squatted there, tense, staring, wordless, while in their young hearts crept a growing and lasting respect and mighty admiration for the fighting prowess of the two fathers they had solemnly sworn to hate and some day to punish and in the end to desert.

Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue fought. They stood flat-footed and toe to toe and slugged. Mighty sledge-hammer blows thudded suddenly against sweat-drenched hide and solid meat and tough bone. The sweat was crimson with the flow of their blood. Winded, their labored breathing sobs racked their heaving chests. Then they stumbled into a grappling clinch and stood there, legs braced, straining and twisting and blinded by the sweat and blood that filled their battered eyes. Then they went down with a heavy crash, neither man fully conscious, and both of them too exhausted to deal punishment.

They were locked like that for a while, and neither man relaxed or let go, using the last of their strength to freeze the holds they held on one another. Then they rolled over and over slow and sluggish, their weary arms and legs gripped in wrestlers' holds, and neither man let go the fraction of an inch.

They rolled into the shallow water at the edge of the sandbar and slobbered their sodden heads in it and filled their gaping dry mouths, swallowing it in big gulps, spitting it out, still locked together in a tangle of weary muscle and bruised bone.

The cold water revived them, and the strength that had ebbed out of them with utter exhaustion now flowed back into their tough bodies. Buck Blue filled his red-whiskered mouth with river water and spewed it into Hugh Farnsworth's eyes, and the big raw-boned Britisher grabbed the sodden red mane of the squawman and shoved Buckskin Blue's head under water. Buck Blue fought free and his teeth sank into Hugh Farnsworth's shoulder.

They thrashed around in the shallow water and into water that was deeper and for a while they fought savagely to drown one another, and almost succeeded. Waterlogged and choked and gasping for breath they fell apart in the deeper water and swam and lunged and staggered and finally crawled on all fours like waterlogged animals through

the shallow water and onto the sandbar. Then without a spoken word or signal of mutual agreement, they each headed for their forty-rod whiskey—Buckskin Blue for his brown jug with the rawhide wrist loop tied in the jug handle, Hugh Farnsworth for his wicker-covered demijohn. They sat soddenly on the sandbar and gulped down the potent raw whiskey.

BOTH men were horribly battered and there was no way of knowing which of them was beaten. Not once had either of them given an outcry or groan of pain. The prodigious amount of rotgut booze each man had drunk had tended to deaden pain without slowing fighting ability. They were unlike in stature, Farnsworth tall and raw-boned and with longer legs and longer arm reach, while Buckskin Blue was compact and solid and swifter. When he came in, crouched, head sunk between his powerful shoulders, nothing could stop him. On dry land or in water, they had been evenly matched. No loser. No winner. Waterlogged, battered, the two men sized one another up through blood-shot eyes that had been pounded to discolored puffiness. The battle had been a draw. Each of them knew that. Only death would claim defeat for either man if ever again they fought.

Neither Hugh Farnsworth nor Buckskin Blue could have told you why they had fought. Rivalry, rather than actual enmity, had possibly motivated the enmity they had each fostered throughout the years during which they had known one another only by reputation. If finger could have been laid on the actual cause for this battle they had fought and finished without victory, the finger would point to one word—supremacy. There can be only one king to rule a kingdom, one ruler of any domain, regardless of its size. Buckskin Blue, squawman, claimed this strip along both sides of the swift Missouri River in Montana, for his own. Hugh Farnsworth, hunted and driven down from the Cypress Hills in Canada, had invaded the Hell Creek Ranch and taken claim away from Buck Blue. And so they had fought.

In regard to the Johnson boys, if a man rode the outlaw trail and lived up to the unwritten laws of their outlaw clan, if he did not violate the steel-clad code of those lawless riders of the dim trails, then he was one of the Johnson boys. There at Buckskin Blue's crossing on the Missouri River, any of the Johnson boys found a hearty welcome, with grub, whiskey, and cartridges for his outlaw guns, and a blind post office where he could leave word for his own kind or pick up a message from other Johnson boys.

Hugh Farnsworth had, somewhere along his renegade back trail, in some manner, by acci-

dent or cold-blooded intent, violated the unwritten laws, broken the code of the Johnson boys, and had been declared an outsider. Distrusted, despised and hated, outlawed by the outlaw tribe, when he moved in here at the Hell Creek Ranch, he had had to fight and lick Buckskin Blue in order to remain. For that reason Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue had fought—without victory to either man.

It was a stalemate. Deadlock. No victory for either man, yet no defeat. Yet something had happened to them and neither man could put a name to it. Somewhere during that long battle their hatred had fought itself out, and in its stead had come a mutual respect for the other man.

The blood of battle had washed away the offending stench of Buck Blue's buckskins. And by the same token it had cleansed the name of Hugh Farnsworth of its unwritten crime against the code of the Johnson boys.

Neither Hugh Farnsworth nor Buckskin Blue had a name for it. They eyed one another and their grins were battered so that their teeth bared from between smashed lips. They swapped jug and demijohn, and drank. It was Rocky Point forty-rod rotgut booze from the same barrel, a strong man's drink.

"We'll be one hell of a tough pair to beat, Hugh." Buckskin Blue broke the silence that had lasted throughout that long battle.

"Right you are, Buck."

"You had a deal in mind. . . ."

"One hell of a deal." Hugh Farnsworth's battered grin twisted. "There's only one drawback to it—it's honest."

"Honest." Buck Blue scowled, mulling over the word, chewing it and swallowing it and waiting for the taste of it to fill him.

"Honest." Hugh Farnsworth repeated the word carefully.

"It's damned late in the game," said Buck Blue finally, "for men like me and you to git religion."

"Trust still to life," quoted Hugh Farnsworth, "the day is not yet old."

"Uh?"

"Chap named Masefield wrote it. Translated it might mean that we'll get away with it. A damned slim chance. A thousand to one they'll never believe us. Neither the Johnson boys nor the Montana Vigilante Law."

"A rough josh," said Buckskin Blue, "to play on the Johnson boys."

"The joke will be on us," smiled the big Britisher, "when we hang by Vigilante rope from a tree limb."

"What give you the idee, anyhow?" asked Buck Blue. "What's in it for men like you and me?"

"The chances are," said Hugh Farnsworth, "that there'll be nothing but bitter disappoint-

ment in it for you and me. Death in the end. Either the Johnson boys will shoot us or we'll be hanged by the Vigilantes for our past crimes. But for a pair of beardless kids named Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue, it might mean something different."

"Meanin'?"

"This Hell Creek Ranch—your place across the river. The badlands range and the range beyond the badlands on both sides. Hay land on both river bottoms. Winter and summer range to run cattle. It could be built up into a big, paying cow outfit. A man don't need to steal to make a fortune in the cattle business in Montana. Only fools steal when honesty pays bigger and more lasting profit. The Vigilante rope is the only pay-off for the Johnson boys."

"That wasn't the deal you had in mind when you showed up here."

"No. Quite the contrary. I intended forcing you into a partnership of high-handed crime. Road agent work. Stagecoach and train hold-ups. Bank robbing. High-grade larceny. I'd force you into partnership or kill you, and claim both sides of the river crossing. It was you who changed the whole scheme of things when you forced me to drink to the future of Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue."

"Well I'll be damned."

"We'll both be damned," grinned Hugh Farnsworth, and lifted the jug.

SENTIMENT was a thing that men like Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue would go almost any lengths to keep deeply hidden inside their hearts. They were fearful now of letting it crop out. Farnsworth had the feeling he'd revealed a soft and vulnerable spot for an enemy's weapon. Buck Blue, recalling something of his own speech in behalf of their two sons, had much the same uneasy notion. They drank now to cover up and drown whatever akin to weakness they had revealed. Now they settled down to serious whiskey drinking.

"About this deal we just made, Johnny Bull. It calls for a lot of likker to sorta float it."

"Then it's a deal, squawman?"

"Your damned right it's a deal."

Buckskin Blue lifted his voice to a loud bellow.

"Tom! Where in hell you hid out, you young half-breed scalawag? Fork a pony an' git on down to Rocky Point Crossin'. Take young Pete along. Fetch me'n my pardner Hugh Farnsworth back all the rotgut forty-rod likker you kin carry a-horseback."

Behind the brush, Tom Blue poked Pete Farnsworth in the ribs. Both boys were excited, tense. They had watched everything. Overheard every word. They were excited and stirred up and not a little bewildered.

They came out from behind the brush, not daring to grin.

"Fetch me my bullwhip." Buck Blue scowled at his tall half-breed son.

Tom got the hand-braided, rawhide bullwhip from the rowboat and gave it to his father. Pete knew that that was the whip that had scarred the lean brown back of Tom Blue.

Buckskin Blue slid a wooden-handled skinning knife from its sheath on his cartridge belt. Deliberately, his puffed, slitted green eyes shining, the squawman slashed the bullwhip into shreds.

Tom Blue stood there in his faded blue shirt and overalls and battered old black Stetson hat. Tears welled in his smoke-gray eyes. All the hatred for his tough, red-bearded father melted in those tears.

"Now git!" Buck Blue's voice was a husky growl. "Git goin'. Fetch back that Rocky Point likker before our crocks run dry."

Hugh Farnsworth gripped Pete's shoulder. It was a strong, hard grip. The big Britisher had no words to go with it. But Pete understood and there was a hard aching lump in his throat. He knew inside his young heart that never again would Hugh Farnsworth lash him with his tongue as Buck Blue had quirted his son Tom with the rawhide bullwhip.

The two boys rode away together. For a mile or more they shared a strange silence. It was Tom Blue who finally broke that silence.

"It looks to me, Pete, like Buck Blue an' Hugh Farnsworth took away our medicine. Makes our medicine awful weak. Theirs is strong medicine—war medicine, Pete."

"We can't run away now, Tom."

"Gosh, no. If we live to be older'n the hills, we'll never see two men fight like that. They tore up the ground. Was you scared, Pete?"

"Scared enough to die in my boots."

"Me, too. I ain't bawled since my ma died from smallpox when I was twelve, but I had to grit my teeth to keep from bustin' out bawlin' when Buck Blue cut up his bullwhip."

Pete nodded. "Hugh Farnsworth won't cuss me out, ever again, Tom. I know that. I wanted to bawl, too."

They talked a lot as they rode along the trail to Rocky Point Crossing. Some of it was man-talk. But the most of it had a lot of kid-stuff mixed into it and Tom Blue's way of talking had a lot of what Pete called Injun in it. Most of Tom Blue's ideas and beliefs had been learned at the lodge of his mother's Sioux father whose name was Eyes in the Sky. Eyes in the Sky was a hundred years old and a medicine man. Tom took the Sioux stories and legends, and put them in his own words and fixed up their meaning according to his own whim. He promised to

teach Pete the Sioux language and sign talk and the meaning of the countless little and big things that went into the making of the special peculiar code of life according to the lights of young Tom Blue. Seventeen-year-old Tom Blue might have been the hundred-year-old Eyes in the Sky talking to a very young disciple who was eager to learn the 'why' of many things.

There was a cleanness to the belief and philosophy of young Tom Blue that was as fresh and flawless and clean as a rain-washed blue sky.

Talking, they rode along together to the log cabin saloon at the Rocky Point Crossing. They didn't see the saddled horses that were hidden in the brush a hundred yards behind the log cabin saloon. They did not know they were being watched until they rode up to the saloon. Then, a dozen or more heavily-armed men came out of the saloon and surrounded their horses and yanked them out of their saddles and hauled them into the saloon.

"The Injun-lookin' kid is Buck Blue's half-breed whelp. The tow-headed button is Hugh Farnsworth's kid. Hogtie the pair of coyote whelps. We can't hang a couple of bald-faced kids. Though General Crook had the right idee about bad Injuns when he said kill the nits along with the lice."

Chapter III

HANGROPE JUSTICE AT HORSETHIEF CROSSING

THEY called themselves the Vigilantes and there were a dozen or sixteen or twenty of them. Grim-jawed, hard-eyed cattlemen and cowhands, none of them made any effort at disguise. They had no need for concealing their identities. They were the Vigilante Law.

Pete Farnsworth knew some of these men by sight. Tom Blue seemed to know them all by sight and by name and by the brands they owned or worked for.

"Tuck in your shirt-tail, Pete," whispered Tom Blue, "and keep your trap shut. We're licked before we start."

The two boys were dragged and shoved into the log cabin saloon. There was no sign of the bearded Tex Alvord who ran the saloon and ferryboat here at Rocky Point Crossing. Pete and Tom were tied hand and foot and left there. It was getting dark outside when the heavily-armed Vigilantes mounted their horses and rode off into the thickening black shadows of night.

It was moonrise when the slow spoken Tex showed up and loosened the ropes that tied the two boys.

"Them fellers told me they'd skin the hide off me if I turned you two young outlaws free before sunrise tomorrow. I ain't settin' you

free. Just easin' these hoggin' strings that's cuttin' off the circulation. If you work loose, I can't help it." Tex filled himself a jug and went off down the river to bait his catfish trotline.

Pete and Tom forked their horses and rode back along the trail. They separated at Tom Blue's suggestion so that if the Vigilantes had the trail set with gun-traps they wouldn't get both boys at the same time.

But the trail back to the Hell Creek Ranch had been left unguarded. Pete and Tom, riding cautiously a couple of hundred yards apart, the halfbreed boy in the lead, heard the sound of shooting when they got within a mile of the ranch. Then the shooting stopped. Tom Blue signaled for Pete to join him and Tom's brown face looked a little white in the moonlight.

"We got to short-cut them Vigilantes, Pete, somehow. Our war medicine better be awful strong. You scared, Pete?"

"I guess I'm scared all right, Tom."

"But you won't rabbit on me."

"No, Tom, I won't rabbit."

Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth had saddle carbines. They cached their horses in the brush and went on afoot with their guns. They heard voices of men talking. A big bonfire showed through the willows and choke-cherry and service-berry brush, the big blaze lighting up the leafy branches of giant old cottonwoods. When the two boys crept closer they saw Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue. The two men were sitting on saddled horses, their hands tied behind their backs, the Vigilante hangman's nooses around their necks and the ropes thrown over the cottonwood limb. Both men were blood-spattered, and still marked and bruised by their epic battle. They had been caught off guard and taken without too much of a gun battle. Now they wore their hangman nooses with typical bravado.

"... and just when we'd got religion," rumbled the deep voice of Buck Blue.

"So much," smiled Hugh Farnsworth twistedly, "for the plans of mice and men and renegades. I told you they wouldn't believe us."

"But you ain't told 'em what we had in mind, Farnsworth. All them fancy, double-barreled words you used on me. Fire 'em at these Vigilante gents fer a broadside. Aim the speech at Circle Dot Fogarty fer a gut-shot. He's the eagle chief of this two-bit Vigilante war party."

Circle Dot Fogarty was a big florid man with graying, wiry black hair and a pair of hard, steel-gray eyes set deep under craggy black brows. He was the chosen leader of the Vigilantes and owner of the big Circle Dot outfit. He rode up now on a big, sweat-marked

brown gelding that wore his Circle Dot brand on the left shoulder, and into the revealing glow of the firelight.

"You was sighted, Farnsworth," Circle Dot Fogarty had a well-controlled, quiet voice, "you and that tow-headed son of yourn, drivin' a bunch of stolen horses down through the badlands of the Hell Crick Ranch. You talked your way out at the Vigilante trial that hung three of your renegade pardners to a cottonwood tree back on Seven Mile Crick. I recollect a solemn promise you gave that you was done with horse stealin' and cattle rustlin' and road agent holdups. Even if we can't locate the stolen horses, we know you done it again."

Buckskin Blue looked at Hugh Farnsworth and spat through battered lips.

"So that's what happened to you when these Vigilantes hung three of the Johnson boys." Buck Blue's voice was heavy with contempt now.

"That's what happened," said Hugo Farnsworth. "I talked my way out."

Hugh Farnsworth was wondering what had happened to the stolen horses he and his son Pete had brought here.

BUCK BLUE could have enlightened him. Buck Blue had told his half-breed son Tom to slide those stolen horses into the river last night and cross 'em while he, Buck Blue, got the big Johnny Bull dead drunk. Now the squawman was wishing Tom Blue hadn't shoved the stolen horses across the Missouri River to scatter out unclaimed in the badlands. The Vigilantes now lacked the actual evidence against Hugh Farnsworth to hang him for a horse thief. Because Hugh Farnsworth had proved a traitor to the Johnson boys, Buckskin Blue was discarding their newly-formed, whiskey-baptized partnership in his hatred for the big Britisher who had quit three of the Johnson boys in a tight.

"We don't need them stolen horses, Fogarty," spoke up one of the Vigilante lieutenants who had drunk too much Rocky Point rotgut whiskey, "to hang Farnsworth. We got his back record. And we got plenty mated against Buckskin Blue. Quirt their two horses out from under the seats of their britches, boys, and we'll watch them two renegades prance the rope dance." The speaker was Burt Burnell of the Broken B outfit.

Tom Blue had given Pete a leg-up into the lower branches of a big cottonwood just beyond the glow of the firelight. Pete had reached down his gun barrel to Tom, had pulled the half-breed boy up into the leafy branches. Both of them had climbed up into the black concealment of the tree. Now Tom Blue's voice cut through the night like a sharp knife through black lard.

"I got my sights lined on Circle Dot Fo-

garty. My pardner's got Burt Burnell in his gun sights. We can't miss if we pull the trigger. Turn Hugh Farnsworth an' Buckskin Blue loose and give 'em a long head-start. You better be quick about it. Because me'n my pardner Pete are just spooked enough to shoot. Turn 'em loose!" Tom Blue's voice had a sharp edge.

Circle Dot Fogarty stiffened in his saddle. His long arm flung out in a sweeping gesture. "String 'em up, boys!" His voice was level-toned.

The saddle gun gripped in Tom Blue's hands, its stock against his lean shoulder, spat a streak of fire. Circle Dot Fogarty was jerked sideways in his saddle by the impact of the leaden slug.

Burt Burnell, lean, wiry, long-boned, hawk-beaked, his black hair sleek and his drooping mustache carefully curled, sobered up fast. His dark skin whitened and his pale amber yellow eyes glinted redly in the firelight.

"Turn the prisoners loose!" His voice was saw-edged. "Turn 'em loose before we're murdered! His voice shrilled a little. "Don't shoot, you young devils!" he shouted through the gun echoes.

There was a long, razor-edged knife in Burt Burnell's hand and he did not wait. He spurred his horse in between the horses forked by the two prisoners and in two swift, long-armed moves Burt Burnell, owner of the Broken B outfit, stood high in his stirrups and slashed apart the two ropes just above the hangman's knots he had himself fashioned. Then he slashed the hogging strings that tied the hands of Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue. The two prisoners were free.

Buck Blue flexed his freed hands and reached for his bridle reins. His teeth bared between his red-whiskered lips. His moccasined heels kicked his horse into motion.

Hugh Farnsworth reached up and freed the hangman's knot. He flung the severed noose into the face of Burt Burnell.

"You white-livered coward." Hugh Farnsworth rode slowly over to where Circle Dot Fogarty sagged in his saddle, gripping the saddle horn.

"I have a slight working knowledge of surgery, Fogarty. I'm putting it at your disposal. Send your Vigilantes on their way. I'll patch you up before I follow my squawman pardner down the long trail out of Montana Territory. But act quickly, man. You're bleeding a lot."

Fogarty nodded. "Hit the trail, men. Go back to your outfits. Burt Burnell is already on his way."

Then Fogarty collapsed across his saddle horn and Hugh Farnsworth caught his sagging bulk, lowered the wounded man gently, and carried him into the log cabin, where he

laid him down there on a tarp covered bed.

The wound was not too serious. The slug had bored a clean hole through the shoulder muscle without breaking the bone. It was a clean flesh wound and it bled profusely. But Hugh Farnsworth had the wound cleansed and dressed and bandaged in a short time. Tom Blue and young Pete helped, and Buckskin Blue grinned, watching.

After Fogarty had been patched up, Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue shook hands with their two sons. Then the two renegades rode away into the night and were gone in the badlands.

PETE FARNSWORTH never learned to swim. He tried so many times that Tom Blue finally told him that unless Pete quit floundering around and splashing, that he, Tom, would throw Pete back in for the last time and ride away from their PT outfit.

"I'm scared of the river, Tom," Pete tried to explain it. "I got to lick that fear of swimmin' water."

At first, Tom tried every way he could think of to teach Pete how to get over that fear of the river. Time after time. Pete paddled a few strokes. Then panic gripped him and his arms flailed the water and he gasped and choked. His own weight dragged him under. Tom Blue dove down and hauled Pete out. Pete Farnsworth shook like he had ague and his eyes were glazed with stark terror. Tom felt sick inside just watching Pete try to fight down the terror of near-drowning.

"You'll have to quit tryin', Pete. I can't take no more of it."

"I'm a rank coward, Tom."

"Coward, hell!"

It was something that Tom Blue's Iajun medicine could not cure. Even the strong medicine of old Eyes in the Sky, who was a hundred years old and a medicine man, had no potency. The two boys came away from the Sioux camp on the reservation sadly disappointed. Tom and the medicine of Eyes in the Sky had nearly drowned Pete Farnsworth in Lodge Pole Creek. And it wasn't deep enough to wet a man's saddle skirts.

"You just sink like a rock, Pete. Like you was weighted down."

The hell of it was that the PT outfit straddled the Missouri River. There wasn't a day that did not call for some kind of river work. Tom wasn't always there to do the job that had to be done in the river, so Pete would just wait till Tom got back.

Pete Farnsworth's fear of water was a terrible phobia. He was afraid to swim a horse across, even when it was one of Tom Blue's river horses that would take a rider across as if he were on a ferryboat.

"Leave the bridle reins alone, Pete," Tom

told him. "That horse will take you across and turn around and fetch you back without dampening the seat of your britches."

Pete got panicky out in the middle of the swift channel and grabbed the bridle reins and hauled the horse over backwards, and Tom had a time saving Pete and the horse because Pete had a death grip on the bridle reins and Tom couldn't break the drowning clutch. He had to cut the throatlatch and yank the headstall off the lunging horse and haul Pete clear of the lunging, pawing, terrified horse.

Pete Farnsworth at last gave up trying to learn how to swim. The best he could do was learn to row a boat. Even when he rowed across the river in the skiff he would get panicked and by the time he'd rowed across to the far bank he would be drenched with cold sweat and blowing hard, with every muscle aching from the wild feverish way he handled the oars.

"You better wait till winter comes and the river freezes over, Pete, to cross over to the other side. Don't tell me you're scared of ice."

Tom Blue made a josh out of it. And so did Pete. As the weeks and months lengthened into a year and the PT outfit that straddled the river grew into a sizeable spread, the cow country made a by-word out of it.

"As scared," they would label some fear, "as Pete Farnsworth is scared of the Missouri River."

Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth did better than all right for a pair of bald-faced kids starting in the cow business. But they owed everything they got in the beginning to Circle Dot Fogarty.

Tom Blue had made the deal with the big cowman, right after Hugh Farnsworth had patched up the bullet rip made by Tom Blue's gun.

"I could have shot to kill," Tom Blue said. "But I shot to cripple you. And Hugh Farnsworth kept you from bleedin' to death. So in that case your life belongs to me. I got first claim on it till you save my life. Then that'll make us even. I read it in a book so it's got to be the truth. I guess you better take an oath on it, mister."

Circle Dot Fogarty said that was right. Hugh Farnsworth wiped a grin off his face as he and Circle Dot Fogarty looked at one another.

So Tom Blue claimed ownership to the life of Circle Dot Fogarty—as he claimed the life of Pete Farnsworth.

Circle Dot Fogarty called a meeting of the Vigilantes when his bullet wound healed.

"Young Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth are goin' to stay located there on the Missouri River. They'll register their PT brand with the Stockmen's Association. They'll run an

honest outfit. And I'll see to it that those two kids are let alone."

Circle Dot Fogarty talked down all arguments against the two boys. In the end the Vigilantes were, for the most part, agreed to give Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue a chance to make good.

Burt Burnell was the only man who was bitterly and profanely opposed to the idea. And he never weakened or backed down in his attitude.

"General Crook had the right idea when he went after Injuns. If you expect to get rid of the lice, you've got to kill the nits. That pair of kids are dangerous like the two renegades that sired 'em. Mark my word, men, Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue will whittle on your cattle and horses. They'll build up their herd with rustled cattle. They'll use their river ranches for an outlaw way-station. That pair of tough kids ain't too young to hang. If they're old enough to handle a cow outfit, they're old enough to stretch rope."

BURT BURNELL was no older than twenty-four or five himself, but he was man enough to ramrod the Broken B outfit left him by his father, who had been killed by unidentified cattle rustlers. Young and tall and handsome enough in a lean-jawed, hawk-beaked way, Burt Burnell knew how to hate, how to carry a long grudge, and in the end, how to pay off that hard grudge.

Circle Dot Fogarty grinned flatly. "I recollect you cuttin' a couple of Vigilante ropes, Burt."

That stopped Burt Burnell. Circle Dot Fogarty and the other cattlemen who belonged to the Vigilantes had witnessed Burt Burnell's fear that night. It was something the handsome, swaggering young cowman had to live down and that was no easy chore in the cow country where every man is judged by hard standards and according to the lights of men who value bravery more than wealth or name.

Burt Burnell's hatred for Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue was a slow poison. If he had been a man like Fogarty he would have taken his hatred out into the open and perhaps shot it out with the two boys or been shot down in the attempt. But that was not Burt Burnell's way. He lacked the guts.

"The majority rules," Burt Burnell told Circle Dot Fogarty and the Vigilantes. "I'll abide by it. But don't try to make me believe it. I hate the guts of that pair of renegade whelps. If ever they bother my Broken B cattle or horses, I'll cut those young coyote whelps down. They better stay off my Broken B range."

Burt Burnell made his talk to Circle Dot Fogarty and the Vigilantes. He told it like

that to old Tex Alvord at Rocky Point Crossing. It was whiskey-talk and Burt Burnell had the backing of some of his tough Broken B cowhands when he made it.

Old Tex Alvord, soft spoken, slow moving, a friend to any man who would let him be a friend, passed it along to Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth for what it was worth.

"That range dude, Burt Burnell, it tellin' it scary, boys. You better know what he's sayin'."

Tom Blue's quick warning look silenced anything Pete Farnsworth might have said by way of returning the fight talk.

"Burt Burnell," Tom Blue passed it off with a grin, "will git over it. Me'n Pete is goin' to be too busy to bother the Broken B livestock. Anyhow, Tex, the PT is an honest outfit. Me'n my pardner Pete would be much obliged if you'd send that word to the Johnson boys."

Tex Alvord said the rustling of the leaves down along the outlaw trail had already taken care of that.

"Buck Blue," said Tex Alvord, "an' Hugh Farnsworth stopped by here to pick up a crock to take along. They told me the yarn. Any time you two buttons got ary word to send to Hugh Farnsworth an' Buck Blue, leave it with me here at Rocky Point Crossin' and I'll see they git the news."

Old Tex Alvord was a man who was left alone by the Vigilantes. Tex owned no iron. When he needed meat and was tired of venison or antelope or catfish, Tex Alvord would butcher a beef. It mattered not at all what brand was on the beef critter. He sank the hide in the river and hung the beef quarters in his meat house. And that was that.

Cowmen like Circle Dot Fogarty took it for a josh. Tex Alvord never sold any of the meat. He ate it, or fed it to any and all men who stopped at Rocky Point Crossing long enough to get the wrinkles out of their belly. Even Burt Burnell pretended to enjoy the joke on his Broken B iron.

Tex Alvord was in a position to do the cattlemen around that part of the cow country an occasional favor. If some winter line camp was thrown short-handed, Tex Alvord would pitch in without being asked. He'd rawhide back in the badlands to fetch in weak cattle or he'd chop open the water holes in the winter's deep ice or shovel hay into cattle that needed feeding. He never asked or expected a dollar in payment.

"I'll eat it up in beef," Tex would say.

Easy-spoken Tex Alvord helped out Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue when the two boys were getting started in their cattle business.

"Circle Dot Fogarty," Tex Alvord told the boys, "told me to kinda keep an eye on

you. See that you got along without fightin'."

So now and then Tex Alvord would show up there at their Hell Creek Ranch where both boys were batching. He'd fetch a quarter of beef or perhaps a sack of grub like sugar and baking powder or coffee from his trading post store at Rocky Point Crossing and stay a day or two, helping them out with their haying or calf-branding.

Sometimes he fetched along a slim girl with unruly black hair and dark eyes and a small nose and red-lipped mouth and stubborn little chin: Circle Dot Fogarty's fifteen-year-old daughter, Bridget.

"She's run off again," old Tex would chuckle. "I got to take her back to the Circle Dot ranch."

Bridget Fogarty had been running away from the Circle Dot home ranch since she was old enough to ride the fat little white pony Tex Alvord had given her on her sixth birthday. The pony had been foaled and raised at Rocky Point Crossing and all the youngster had to do was give Snowflake his head and he'd fetch her straight to Rocky Point Crossing.

THE FIRST time little Bridget Fogarty took a notion to run off, Circle Dot Fogarty and every cowpuncher from his outfit and neighboring cow outfits formed a big search party that rode night and day till Tex Alvord sent word to Circle Dot Fogarty that the little girl was safe.

"The young 'un," Tex Alvord sent word to the missing child's father and mother, "is catfishin'. I'll fetch her home when she's ready to go back."

Tom Blue had known Bridget Fogarty since she was a little thing in pigtails. She eyed the half-breed boy with frank adoration. It was hero worship and it pleased young Tom Blue, but he covered his pleased vanity with a sort of careless tolerance.

"That darned fool kid," Tom Blue was all of nine or ten years old, "follers a man around like a hound pup, always underfoot. Why don't you git for home where you belong?"

"When we grow up and get married, Tom, you won't think I'm underfoot. I'll have to cook your grub and wash and mend your clothes—"

"Gosh sakes. Married. When I'm old enough to think about gettin' married I'll buy me a squaw. White girls are shore silly. I'm part Injun. I'll be a squawman like Buckskin Blue."

But when Tex Alvord showed up with the fifteen-year-old girl in faded blue cotton shirt and patched overalls and wearing shopmade boots and a Stetson hat pulled down on her curly black head, it was the first time Pete Farnsworth had ever seen Bridget Fogarty.

Nobody had ever told Pete that Circle Dot Fogarty had a daughter.

"How, Injun!" she called out to Tom Blue. "Tell me about how the Vigilantes darned near hung Buck Blue. Is that tow-head kid the Pete Farnsworth Circle Dot talks about?"

"You're gettin' too old," scowled Tom Blue, "to be runnin' off. Looks like you'd commence sometime to outgrow it."

"I came along with Tex, to pick up fifty head of stolen horses you promised Circle Dot Fogarty. Don't be so darned grouchy. Quit showin' your Injun, Tomahawk."

"When she wants to get a rise outa me," Tom Blue told Pete Farnsworth, "she calls me Tommyhawk. She's Circle Dot Fogarty's daughter, Bridget. She wants to be cattle queen of Montana when she should be home helpin' her ma with the dishes. . . ."

Tom Blue ignored her and spoke to Tex. "I got them horses in the Buck Blue pasture across the river, Tex. Circle Dot Fogarty said he'd send his horse wrangler down after 'em and me'n Pete'll help him outa the badlands and on to the Circle Dot horse camp. The Vigilantes kin claim 'em there."

"I'm the horse wrangler," Bridget was looking at Pete Farnsworth, and Pete was red-eared and embarrassed by the open, dark-eyed appraisal of the girl who sat her horse like an old cowhand. "And since it's so darned much bother, Injun, I'll take Pete across the river with me. While you talk Injun to Tex. Come along, Pete."

The Missouri River was low at that time of the year and there wasn't more than perhaps a hundred feet of swimming water out in the channel. The horse Pete was forking was one of Buck Blue's string and a water-dog when it came to swimming. The big, flax-maned gelding could cross the river with a kid of Pete's light weight without wetting the saddle skirts.

"Go along with her, Pete." There was a sharpness to Tom Blue's voice. The look in his smoke-gray eyes was hard.

Pete saw the look and heard the taunting challenge in the half-breed boy's voice. He was puzzled, then nettled. He fought back his stark fear of the Missouri River. He reined the big gelding and headed for the water's edge. Bridget gave Tom Blue a red-lipped smile and a toss of her curly black head. She rode up alongside Pete so close that their stirrups scraped, and held out her hand across her saddle horn.

"I'm Bridget Fogarty, Pete. You call me Biddy. Circle Dot told me a lot about you. I'll race you across the river."

She reached out and gripped Pete's clumsy hand, then headed for the river. She had ridden out a ways ahead of him when Pete spurred his big horse into the river and

through the shallow water. Hock deep. Belly deep. Cold sweat beaded Pete's face. The color drained from his tanned skin to leave it a sickly, pale yellow color and his sky-blue eyes glazed with stark fear.

Bridget Fogarty had taken a head start and she and her horse were out in the swift channel and into swimming water before Pete got his stirrups wet. She was as much at home in the river as was Tom Blue and she had pulled her feet out of the stirrups and bent her legs back to keep her boots clear of the water. She was singing Buckskin Blue's song about the Johnson boys:

"Oh, the Johnson boys they built a mill,
They built it on the side of a hill.
Oh, they worked and worked all night and day
But they couldn't make the darned mill
pay!"

She was across the deep channel and her Circle Dot sorrel gelding was lunging into shallower water when she looked back, laughing, across her shoulder. The song died and the laughter in it froze.

Pete Farnsworth had dropped his knotted bridle reins and was gripping the saddle horn with both hands. The look of fear was stamped on his face and showed in his eyes. He hung onto the saddle horn while the horrible fear crawled like a slimy cold snake through his guts and knotted the inside of his belly. His teeth gritted as he choked back the sobbing yelp of stark terror that welled up inside him. He cringed in his saddle and his fear-glazed eyes were blind to the sight of everything but the swift water all around him.

He was like that when the big gelding lunged out of swimming water and splashed through shallow water and onto the long wide sandbar.

The girl sat her dripping horse. Her red lips were twisted and the laughter gone out of her dark hazel eyes. She eyed Pete Farnsworth with an unpleasant mixture of puzzlement and contempt.

Pete's fear-glazed eyes had not yet focused to see the girl plainly when, without a word, she reined her horse and rode away from him as if he were something that made her a little nauseated.

PETE FARNSWORTH was left alone there on the sandbar. He was cringing and shivering and could not get control of himself. He was soaked to the waistband of his Levi overalls from the river water, but it was cold clammy fear-sweat that beaded his yellowish face.

Then Pete Farnsworth heard the voice of Tom Blue come across the river and it shocked him into reality.

"Go along, Pete. Help Biddy Fogarty fetch

over them horses Hugh Farnsworth stole when he begged off at the hangin' of three of the Johnson boys. . . ."

Pete Farnsworth heard Tom Blue. Sick inside and terrified as he was, Pete could not help recognize the hatred the half-breed boy put into his voice. Pete did not understand why.

But grizzled Tex Alvord from Rocky Point Crossing understood and a hardness crept into his slow, lazy drawl.

"You shore got some of Buck Blue's blood in you, son. I hate to watch it crop out. Hugh Farnsworth's kid Pete is a better man right now than you'll ever be. Now hit that river and fetch over them horses. Or I'll double a rope and lay it acrost your half-breed back."

Swift anger blazed like sparks through the dark gray smoke of Tom Blue's eyes. But the puckered eyes of grizzled Tex Alvord stared the half-breed boy down.

"Little Bridget Fogarty," Tex Alvord was a kindly man who hated to hurt anybody or any animal, "is a white girl. You're a Sioux squaw's half-breed son, Tom. Circle Dot Fogarty is a prideful man who would rather see his only daughter dead than married to a half-breed. It's the first time I suspected anything. So it's the first and only time I'll ever say a word about it. I've overlooked the fact you've growed up into a man, Tom Blue."

The look in Tom Blue's eyes was an ugly thing to see. And grizzled Tex Alvord hated to look into it. Tex Alvord from Rocky Point Crossing was a strange man, a man who lived alone and was sufficient unto himself. His back trail had been well covered—if there was anything on it that needed hiding. In many ways this half-breed son of Buckskin Blue was like his own son. Tom Blue's Sioux squaw mother had nursed Tex Alvord through the smallpox plague, and his tough hide was pitted by the scars that would forever remind him that an Indian woman had nursed him and taken him out of the black valley of death and given him his life. He had been barely strong enough in his recuperation to attend the funeral of the Sioux squaw who had died of the same dread smallpox from which her nursing had dragged Tex Alvord back to life.

Tom Blue, young half-breed, whose heart was more Sioux than white man's, stared at the grizzled Tex Alvord.

"Buck Blue," Tom's voice had a brittle sound, "is the only man on earth I'd ever let double a rope acrost my back. Don't try it, Tex, or I'll kill you."

Tom Blue rode his horse into the Missouri River and across it and the song of the Johnson boys came drifting back to Tex Alvord where he sat his horse, his leathery face as gray as the ashes of an old campfire.

" Because 'twas built by the Johnson

boys!" The song had a haunting melody.

When Tom Blue splashed ashore on the far side of the Missouri River, young Pete Farnsworth was gone. He had somehow picked up the slack in his bridle reins and Buck Blue's big gelding had taken his dazed young rider along the sandbar and through the red willows and where the wild roses bloomed and on into the badlands beyond. Young Pete Farnsworth was alone with his shame and his shaken sweaty fear when he found himself riding, he knew not where, through the broken badlands where the scrub pines grew. It might have been a mile or ten miles farther on when the sweat of fear dried and the color came back into his skin and the blind glaze was gone from eyes that were as blue as the Montana sky.

Pete Farnsworth, son of Hugh Farnsworth, would have ridden away then, taking all the bitter humiliation and shame that was in his young heart with him. Then and there.

But somewhere there dimly sounded the voice of Tom Blue, and the half-breed boy was singing the song about the Johnson boys. Pete Farnsworth remembered the solemn oath he had sworn, the blood-brother pledge he had made with Tom Blue, who had saved, and therefore claimed the life of Pete Farnsworth.

Young Pete Farnsworth heard the last dim echo of that song about the fabulous Johnson boys, and he reined his horse around and rode back.

But Tom Blue and Bridget Fogarty had already rounded up the horses Hugh Farnsworth had stolen and pledged back to Circle Dot Fogarty. The half-breed son of Buckskin Blue and the tomboy daughter of Circle Dot Fogarty had crossed the horses and were already on their way with them to the Circle Dot horse camp beyond the badlands.

Only the grizzled Tex Alvord was there on Buck's side of the Missouri River. Tex had Buck Blue's rowboat and had pulled up the trotline and taken off last night's catch of catfish from the trotline's hooks and let the trotline back into the water. Tex Alvord's eyes were puckered in his leathery skin and his voice was a lazy drawl.

"Better unsaddle and turn that flaxy horse loose, son. And put them danged catfish into that wet gunnysack. Cut this beef liver into little hunks and draw up the trotline an' bait them hooks while I row back acrost."

Chapter X

PARDNERS TO HELL AND BACK!

TEX ALVORD helped Pete with the evening chores. After supper the grizzled Tex and the beardless Pete sat on their hunkers in the gathering dusk and shared a long silence

that was helped along by the chuckling whisper of the river against the banks. They fished for catfish with long willow poles and a sagebrush smudge to drive off the mosquitoes. The catfish nibbled the bait off their hooks and Tex said it was just as well the fish got away with the bait because he and Pete wasn't fishing for grub but just to while away the evening until moonrise.

"I got a feelin' in my creaky bones, son," said Tex Alvord, "that somethin' is wrong. Somebody lied somewheres."

When Pete asked Tex Alvord what he meant, Tex said that he couldn't exactly find the defalgalty. On the surface it seemed to be all right. He said Biddy Fogarty hadn't run off from the Circle Dot home ranch or from the horse camp, either—any more than Circle Dot Fogarty had sent his tomboy daughter down to the Hell Crick Ranch to pick up that bunch of stolen horses.

"Fogarty wouldn't send his daughter to pick up them horses. Somebody put her up to it. For a josh, mebbly. But most mebbly it ain't ary kind of a comical josh. And it could be a laugh on somebody that won't stay alive long enough to listen to the laughin'. All I know is that little Biddy Fogarty showed up at Rocky Point Crossin' and said she was headed for the Hell Crick Ranch to pick up the stolen horses that's been held in pound till the worked brands and actual ownership of the horses kin be straightened out. You might shed some light on it, son, if you was to tell me what kind of a deal was made between Hugh Farnsworth and Circle Dot Fogarty."

Pete Farnsworth said that Hugh Farnsworth had left orders with Pete and Tom to gather the stolen horses and hold them in Buck Blue's horse pasture till the blotched brands peeled and haired over and the original brands could be read and the horses returned to their actual owners.

"I don't know where my father picked up those horses, Tex," said Pete. "Hugh Farnsworth had me farmed out to the livery barn owner at Chinook. I was gettin' my schoolin' on the side. My father showed up. He was in a hurry. He said the Vigilantes had picked him and three other horse thieves up. That they'd hung the other three and turned him loose and there was something about the worked brands on those horses that had him fooled and puzzled. And he told Circle Dot Fogarty, here in this cabin while he was makin' his deal with Fogarty, that if those stolen horses could be hid out and held till the fresh brands scabbed and peeled and haired, that the worked brands might hang one of Circle Dot Fogarty's holier-than-thou Vigilantes. What's wrong, Tex?"

Tex Alvord had thrown his fishing pole with its line and bullet sinker and whiskey-jug,

cork float into the Missouri River. Dropped it, rather than thrown it. He was on his feet. His leathery face with its week's stubble of graying beard was a grim mask in the moonlight.

"Wet a horse with his hide on and the brand shows up. Burt Burnell gambled away the Broken B outfit his old man left him. Like father, like son. Bob Burnell built up his Broken B outfit with a long rope and a runnin' iron and there ain't been a time when the Broken B was on the square. Buck Blue shot and killed Bob Burnell at my saloon at the Rocky Point Crossin' when Bob Burnell cheated Buck Blue outa Buck's half int'rest in the Broken B iron that was built by the Johnson boys. Now Burt Burnell has gambled his Broken B away, and taken to horse stealin' and road agent hold-ups. And Circle Dot Fogarty is the man that won the Broken B outfit in an all-night poker game at Rocky Point Crossin'. He tore up the bill of sale and told Burt Burnell to take back his Broken B on one condition. And that one condition was that Burt Burnell would stay plumb far away from Circle Dot Fogarty's daughter, Bridget. Little Biddy, like every other girl in the cow country, has the mistaken notion that the spur-jinglin' Burt Burnell is the best woman-ketch in the Montana cow country."

Tex Alvord was looking grim. His puckered blue eyes clouded.

"I'm scared, son," he told Pete Farnsworth, "that we're a day late and a dollar short. By now, Tom Blue is dead."

"Tom Blue . . . ?"

"Tom read the wet brand on them horses when they come ashore. Tom is almighty close-mouthed. He'd crawl through Hell's hot clinkers on his young half-breed belly and let the red clinkers burn him apart, for little Biddy Fogarty. Time's slipped on us, son. We'll be too late now. . . ."

Young Pete Farnsworth did not quite understand. Grizzled Tex Alvord had done his thinking aloud and had left out some of it. Tex Alvord gripped young Pete's shoulder with a gnarled hand.

They were saddling their horses when Bridget Fogarty rode up out of the moonlit night. Her face was chalky white and her faded blue shirt was stained with a widening dark spot across her left shoulder. Her horse was played out and she clung to the saddle horn.

"Tom Blue," Bridget Fogarty's bloodless lips spread in a twisted grimace, "claims he owns you, Pete. He's hollering for help. When it came to a bad tight, Tom Blue shivered and shook like a gun-shy bird dog. Burt Burnell shot a hole in Tom Blue's hand and that half-breed threw his gun away."

"Where was Circle Dot Fogarty?" There

was a hardness in old Tex Alvord's voice. "Circle Dot Fogarty," said Bridget, "rode into a Broken B gun-trap. I'm a darned fool, Tex."

Tex Alvord said sure she was a darned fool. That all women were. That was why he never married one. But little Biddy Fogarty didn't hear what Tex said. She had fallen sideways out of her saddle and into the grizzled riverman's arms. He carried her as he would carry a baby, into the cabin.

"If I don't git busy right away, son," Tex Alvord told Pete, "this young 'un will die. I still think little Biddy is worth savin'. I'm afraid, young Pete, you're on your own."

PETE FARNSWORTH told old Tex Alvord that even if Tom Blue did have a claim on his life, still he, Pete, was taking time to help Tex doctor the bullet rip in little Bridget Fogarty's shoulder. And he did. It wasn't a bad wound but it had bled a lot and it was painful. But Biddy gritter her teeth and tried to grin. She fainted only once and that was when Tex cauterized the wound to kill any blood poison. He used some carbolic and bluestone he found at the barn.

They got a disjointed story from the girl. She said it was Burt Burnell who had ribbed her into coming down here to get the bunch of stolen horses. Burt had ridden over to the Circle Dot horse camp. He said that he had just come from the Circle Dot ranch and that Fogarty had send word to his daughter to ride down after the horses. Burt Burnell had been foxy enough to make it sound casual. Fooled her completely.

"Burt wanted to come along," said Biddy, "but I gave him the slip. I thought I was smart. That he'd follow me and overtake me and we'd hold hands as we rode along. Burt's a good looking cowboy and every girl I know has tried to marry him. I know he's no good. That he's a drinker and a gambler and makes a fool out of every country girl who runs after him. But he's a good looking cowboy, and smarter than most men figure him."

"Or most wimmin'," said Tex grimly.

"That's plenty right, Tex. Burt Burnell had no idea of following me. He and a bunch of his tough Broken B cowhands waited along the trail for me to come back with those horses. He knew Tom Blue would be with me and he figured on Pete Farnsworth being along. Tom Blue and I rode into the Broken B gun trap. Burt hollered to me to get out from underfoot. Then he opened up. When the shooting started, Tom Blue threw away his gun and hollered quits. That half-breed quit like a mongrel pup."

Grizzled Tex Alvord shut her up right now. He said if she wasn't hurt, he'd give her the good hard sound spankin' she had coming for

a long time. And Tom Alvord meant just that.

"Pete here is scared of water and you called him a coward. Tom Blue is gun-shy. Outside of that, either of them two boys is as brave as the next man. But a lot of men have a fear of somethin'. I saw Circle Dot Fogarty so scared he busted out in a sweat and run when a Mexican pulled a knife on him. I know a man's scared to death of lightnin'. Me—I'm scared of snakes. Rattlesnakes, harmless bull-snakes, li'l ol' water snakes. All right, Pete. I don't need you no more. I'll stay here with Biddy. You hit the trail for the Circle Dot home ranch. Tell Fogarty to gather a quick posse an' go after Burt Burnell. Don't tackle anything alone."

Tex asked Biddy where the Burt Burnell Broken B gun trap was located and how many men Burt had and she gave Pete the location. It was there at the big pole gate to the horse camp pasture. Burt Burnell had his whole Broken B outfit with him—fifteen or twenty or twenty-five men and each of them tough enough in his own right to kill a man if he was paid for it.

Pete Farnsworth took his saddle gun and hit the trail. He knew that Tex Alvord was itching to come along. But Tex was scared Burt Burnell might take a notion to come here after her. He'd seen her ride away at a run. When Burt had spooked Tom Blue into throwing away his gun, Burt had yelled at the girl to hold on; to pull up her horse and wait for him. But she had kept going. It just might be that Burt Burnell had trailed Biddy Fogarty back here in the darkness. So Tex was staying here to ride close gun-herd on the girl.

"So long, Pete."

"So long, Tex."

Then Biddy Fogarty had reached out and taken hold of Pete's hand.

"Come back, Pete. Give me a chance to tell you I'm sorry."

Pete Farnsworth heard the sound of shooting there beyond the big pole gate at the Circle Dot horse camp. It sounded as though a lot of guns were mixed up in it. Gradually, the battle scattered and spread out, each man for himself. The sound of the gun fight was a mile away. Pete reined up in the black shadow of some brush, afraid of being shot from ambush.

Tex had told Pete to ride wide of the horse camp and head straight for the Circle Dot home ranch. But back in young Pete's mind was half-breed Tom Blue's taunting laugh and the pledge Tom had exacted from Pete. Now Tom Blue had hollered for help, demanding the claim he held on Pete's life.

Pete Farnsworth might be scared of swimming water. But he wasn't gun-shy. He had no thought of the big odds piled against him,

save that he wasn't going to be damned fool enough to make a one-man open attack.

So he sat his horse back in the shadow, gripping his gun, every muscle and nerve in his hard young body taut.

He heard somebody coming on horseback, spurring his mount to a dead run, heading straight for the closed gate. The rider came from the direction of the horse camp, riding as if the devil himself was at the heels of his horse, looking back across his shoulder like a scared coyote.

YOUNG Pete Farnsworth relaxed a little. He knew the horse and rider. The horse was one of the string Tom Blue rode. The rider was the half-breed son of Buckskin Blue. Tom Blue was so scared he was sobbing. When he had to pull up to swing open the big pole gate, the half-breed boy was so terrified he fell rather than leaped from his horse. He was sobbing and whimpering wildly as he fumbled in the dark for the gate pin.

Pete Farnsworth laughed. He forced out the short laugh. Tom Blue heard the sound of it without recognizing Pete's voice. Tom's yell was shrill and brittle.

"Don't shoot, Burt! Don't kill me! I'm scared!"

"Take it easy, Injun!" called Pete Farnsworth.

"Pete! Save me, Pete!"

"All you got to do, Injun, is to ride through."

Pete took a chance on being bushwhacked. He rode up to the big pole gate and without dismounting he leaned down and pulled the gate pin free and swung open the pole gate.

"That squares us, Tom." Pete Farnsworth kept his voice down to a level tone. "You saved my life. I'm savin' yours. Git for home."

"Come along with me, Pete." Tom Blue's voice was an unsteady whisper. "I'm scared."

"There's nothin' to be scared of, Tom. I just rode up the trail. There's nobody bushed up anywhere along it. Tex Alvord is there at the ranch with Biddy Fogarty. Biddy said you was hollerin' for me to help you. So here I am. Before you go, tell me what's goin' on yonder. Biddy said Burt Burnell had you prisoner."

"Circle Dot Fogarty and some of his cow-punchers showed up. I got away in the excitement. Fogarty cussed me out. He told me now he'd saved my half-breed hide and for me to take it off outa sight somewheres and wash the yellow, stinkin' fear off it. Then come back and make a gun fightin' hand. Because he was in a tight. But I'm scared to go back, Pete. I'm a yellow-bellied, half-breed coward!"

"No you ain't, Tom. And neither am I. Circle Dot Fogarty ain't so big almighty brave

neither. A Mexican got locoed drunk once, years ago, and run Fogarty all over the ranch with a knife. And Tex Alvord is howlin' scared of a water snake. A man kin be scared to death of one thing and still not be a rank coward. That ain't in none of your books, but Tex Alvord knows what he's talkin' about. Quit shiverin' an' bawlin'. Who's doin' all the shootin' yonder and how many on each side?"

"Buckskin Blue," the wild terror in Tom Blue's voice was steady, "has bin scared of lightnin' all his life. First clap of thunder and he'll dive for his hole. Under the bed or anywhere."

"And Hugh Farnsworth," grinned Pete, "has bin scared of a horse since the time years ago when his foot got hung in the stirrup and he got drug a ways. All right, Injun?"

"I'm all right, Tow-head."

"Then how many men is backin' Circle Dot Fogarty?"

"Not too many. Burt Burnell's got his whole darned outfit. Fogarty showed up with about six cowhands."

"It's too far to town to fetch Vigilante help," said Pete. "Think hard, Injun."

Tom Blue fought down the fear that crawled inside him while he heard the distant sound of gunfire. A hard sparkle came into his dark eyes and his white teeth flattened in a grin.

"There's the Johnson boys."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I've swum a lot of stolen horses for the Johnson boys," said Tom Blue. "It's about time they returned the favor. I know how to git word to 'em. Come along, Pete."

Pete Farnsworth grinned faintly and took a page from the book of Tom Blue.

"Remember the night I had my sights lined on Burt Burnell, Injun? I let him live. His life belongs to Pete Farnsworth, don't it?"

"Yeah, but you'll never git Burt Burnell to admit it. You can't just put it up to purty Burt Burnell and tell him to throw down his gun and expect him to do it."

"I don't aim to make any deal like that." A grim note crept into Pete Farnsworth's voice. "I let Burt Burnell go, once. This time he don't git away. I'm killin' him. Now gather them Johnson boys if that war medicine you brag about it worth a darn. So long, Injun."

Tom Blue had a dazed look in his eyes.

"So long, tow-head," he called after Pete softly.

Then Tom Blue headed for the badlands. The trail he took twisted in and out through the broken, scrub pine-covered hills. When he had ridden into the heart of the badlands, the half-breed son of Buckskin Blue reined his sweat-marked, leg-weary horse to a halt. His black head tilted back and his face lifted

towards the sky that was graying in the first dawn and the howl of a wolf came from the half-breed boy's throat. It was the howl that the leader of a wolf pack sounds when he wants to gather his pack for a prowl.

Tom Blue waited. Then not half a mile away the wolf howl was returned. Then from the badlands the wolf-howls echoes were flung back and forth and there might have been one or two wolves howling or a pack of fifty wolves howling. Then the wolf howls stopped and the last echoes died away. Tom Blue rode up on a bare butte and he and his horse stood revealed there like a man and horse carved out of the badlands rimrock sandstone until the Johnson boys rode up to where he waited for them.

BURT BURNELL and his tough Broken B cowhands had Circle Dot Fogarty trapped at his own horse camp. That was how Burt Burnell wanted it. That was how he had played it. He figured his luck was riding high and he couldn't lose. When the Broken B cowpunchers had shot and killed the few men Fogarty had brought along, Burt Burnell told his men to quit shooting. Then the handsome, spur-jingling owner of the Broken B iron voiced the dicker he had in mind.

"Let's me'n you talk cold turkey, Circle Dot."

"I got nothin' to say to you, tinhorn."

"Don't be too certain about that." Burt Burnell wasn't drunk. But he'd had enough to make him tough and mean and foxy. "Supposin' I tell you I've got your daughter, Bridget?"

"Don't lie to me, Burt."

"I don't need to lie."

"Then trot out that kid of mine. Or lemme hear the sound of her voice."

"I don't have her here. But she's easy for me to locate. And while my boys keep you here, I kin go after her and fetch her here. My boys just got orders to quit shootin'. But they kin open up again any time. And they won't miss. You kin save your hide, Circle Dot. All I want is Bridget and a half int'rest in your outfit as your son-in-law."

"Outside of that, tinhorn," there was a snarl in Circle Dot Fogarty's voice, "you ain't askin' for a thing."

"I don't like to be called a tinhorn!"

"Then lemme call you a plain, two-bit horse thief, Burnell. A cattle rustler. You hid behind the Vigilantes to steal cattle and horses, and you shifted the blame to the Johnson boys. When I found out the kind of a low-down thing you was, you knew you'd have to kill me. Hugh Farnsworth caught onto you when you used him and three of the Johnson boys to handle your stolen horses. Your Broken B cowhands double-crossed them. Three of them

Johnson boys got hung. Hugh Farnsworth was let go. I was leader of the Vigilantes and I let Hugh Farnsworth go when he whispered to me that he'd prove that some Vigilante was doin' most of the cattle rustlin' an' horse stealin' an' murdering, road-agent hold-ups. Your brand was on them stolen horses. You stole 'em from yourself and worked the brands and hired Farnsworth, and three of the Johnson boys to run them stolen horses across the river at Buck Blue's Crossin' and then you led the Vigilantes down there to hang Hugh Farnsworth an' Buckskin Blue. You'd have gotten away with that Vigilante hangin' if it hadn't bin for two bald-faced kids."

"Prove that when you're dead and gone to Hell, then, Fogarty!" Burt Burnell's voice cracked. "Kill him, you curly wolves!"

A saddle carbine cracked. Burt Burnell gave a sharp yelp of pain.

"Hold your fire, boys!" Burt Burnell's voice cracked sharply. "Which one of you drunken boneheads fired that shot? You damn near shot my head off. It earmarked me! Which one of you Broken B—"

"It was me, mister." Pete Farnsworth's voice sounded young and shrill.

Back in the coulees where the buckbrush grew thick and dense it was still dark where the last night's shadows held. But along the bare ridges the night had faded out into dawn as gray as cartridge lead and there was a crimson streak like blood across the gray blanket of sky. Out of that blood-streaked, leaden gray dawn rode two men and a boy.

Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue were neither of them men who liked to run away from anything they claimed. They had never gone farther than an old hide-out in the badlands where a Sioux war party under the war-medicine guidance of Eyes in the Sky had hidden out a long time from General Crook. Eyes in the Sky had showed the hide-out to his beloved half-breed grandson, Tom Blue. And Tom Blue had shown the hidden spot in the badlands to his squawman father Buckskin Blue.

When the time came, Tom Blue rode there to fetch Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth, with the wolf howl of the Johnson boys, back to either freedom from Vigilante punishment or a fighting death. So Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue rode up out of the blood-streaked dawn. And trailing behind, sweating in his terror of gunfire, rode Tom Blue.

Pete Farnsworth did not see his father and Buck Blue coming. All that Pete saw was Burt Burnell in his gunsights.

Pete had used his first shot to nick the ear of Burt Burnell. Now he used all his remaining cartridges to ruin that high-crowned Stetson hat. It wasn't until he fired his last shot that Pete realized he had emptied his gun.

BURT BURNELL had crouched and cringed where he sat his horse behind the buckbrush. But he hadn't been too badly scared to lose count of the shots.

"Overplayed your hand, you young coyote whelp. Gimme that young Pete Farnsworth, boys. I want his coyote scalp to give my best girl, Biddy. I'll cut him down while you curly wolves git Circle Dot Fogarty. . . ."

Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth spurred their horses down the bald ridge and at the Broken B gun-slingers scattered in the brush below. The squawman and Johnny Bull came shooting. Circle Dot Fogarty rode out to meet them and the blazing guns of those three men cut into the brush and smoked out the Broken B cowhands.

It was a short and hard and bitter gunfight.

Hugh Farnsworth rode down at Burt Burnell, and the owner of the Broken B was so shaken and shocked into cold sobriety and into the fear of certain death, that his bullets went wild. He spurred his horse in a last desperate effort to get away with a bullet-nicked hide. Burt Burnell charged straight into the deadly fire of Buckskin Blue's gun, was shot from the saddle of his stampeding horse.

Pete Farnsworth came out of the brush with an empty gun. He looked straight into the eyes of his father who had slid his sweaty horse to a halt and swung from his saddle.

"I would like," said Hugh Farnsworth, "to shake the hand of my son."

Then when Pete shook hands with his father, Tom Blue rode up with Buckskin Blue and Circle Dot Fogarty, one arm in a make-shift blood-stained sling. The three older men exchanged quick looks and then they left the two boys together and rode around to tally the dead and to send the wounded Broken B renegades along their one-way trail out of Montana.

Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue looked into each other's eyes for a long moment. Men do that same thing when they size one another up in an effort to appraise their true value. But two boys that age are far more hard and critical of one another because, until a man reaches maturity, he lacks tolerance. It is youth who is exactly cruel—and sometimes more just in his judgment than a man, because a man's standards can be tainted by things like the lust for power.

Tom Blue and Pete Farnsworth had no selfish longing for power, no need of money. But they did know what it meant to want the love and respect of a girl.

Their eyes met and held and slid away in a strange self-consciousness. Enmity, if ever there had been any, was completely gone. There was a comradeship there now.

Then Tom Blue, perhaps to cover that embarrassment when neither boy could find the right words to tell what he had in his heart, looked up at the dawn.

Tom grinned and pointed into the last night's sky that had broken into a blood-stained leaden dawn and now promised a cloudless Montana day.

"You see that star, Pete. Watch it till it fades. Make your wish. Whatever it is that you wish, it will come true. That's good medicine."

Pete and Tom watched the morning star fade in a new sky, and they made their wish.

Hugh Farnsworth and Buckskin Blue and Circle Dot Fogarty watched the two boys and liked what they saw.

"This Montana country," said Circle Dot Fogarty, "is plenty big to hold the three of us. Hold us together as friends."

Over where the two boys stood, Tom Blue bragged a little. And Pete Farnsworth believed him then and during all the years that were to follow when their partnership held and endured and became all the stronger.

"Her Sioux name is Fawn, Pete. She's a full blood. I guess I kin scrape up enough of them Broken B ponies Burt Burnell don't need no more, to buy her accordin' to the ways of the Sioux. Then we'll git a circuit-rider parson to marry us accordin' to white man's ways. Like Buckskin Blue married the daughter of Eyes in the Sky. You made your wish, Pete, on the star?"

"I made my wish, Tom. It's already answered. I wished for Pete Farnsworth and Tom Blue to always stay pardners."

"Same thing I wished." Tom Blue's eyes were bright in the dawn.

Perhaps grizzled Tex Alvord had something of Sioux belief. He pointed out the fading morning star to little Bridget Fogarty as he rode along slowly with her and into sight of the three waiting men and two boys.

Old Tex Alvord put it into words with his slow deliberate drawl.

"Looks like it's all over here, young 'un, but the shoutin'. That's young Pete Farnsworth waitin' fer you, child. You'll marry that tow-head kid in a year or two and be almighty happy."

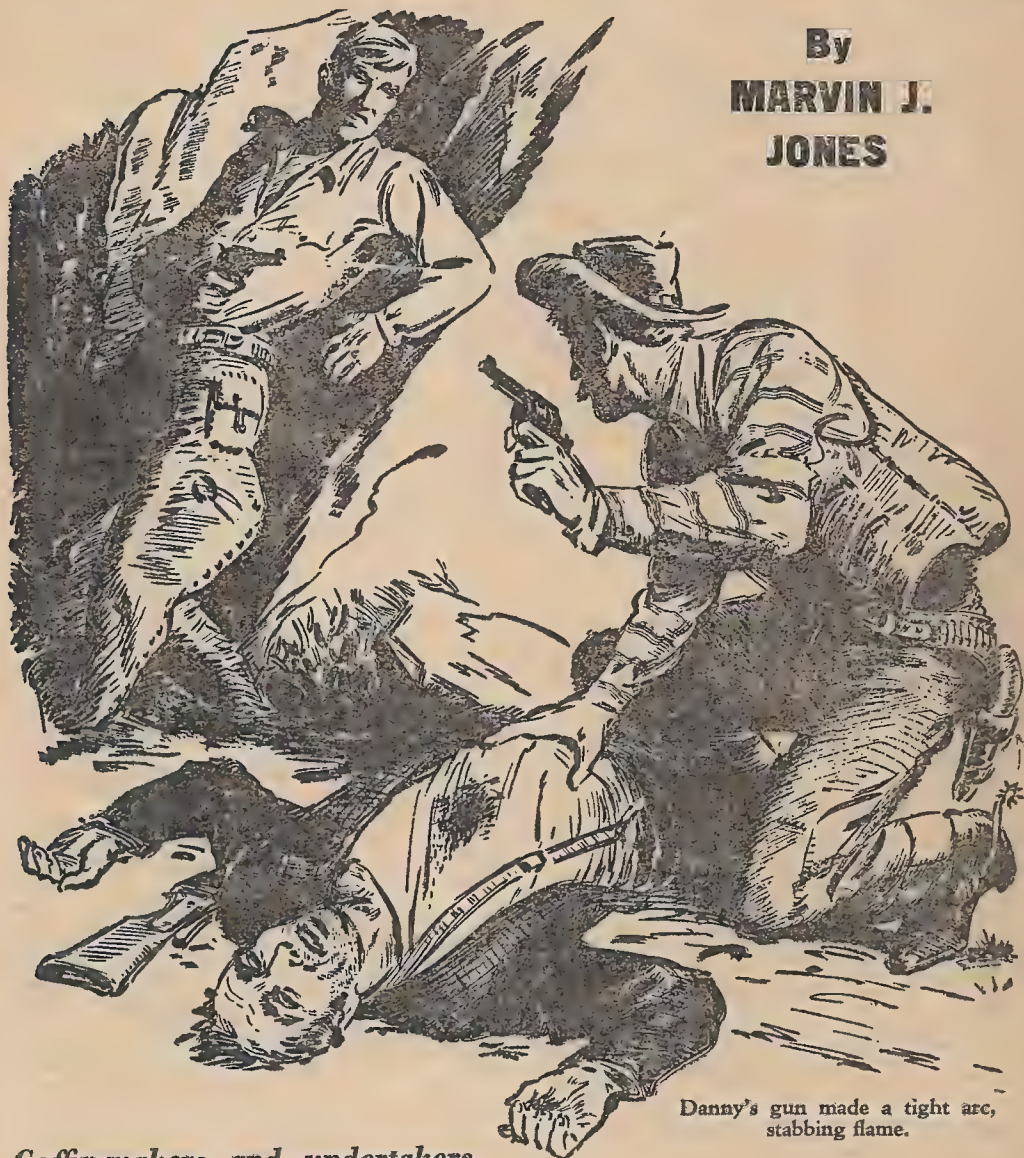
"That is what I wished on the morning star, Tex. I won't run away from Pete . . . ever. . . ."

Then the rising sun glinted in the puckered blue eyes of grizzled old Tex Alvord of Rocky Point Crossing, and he spoke again.

"Tom Blue will always be gun-shy. And Pete Farnsworth will always be scared of swimmin' water. But that'll never keep them two men from bein' almighty brave in the eyes of men."

DEAD MEN LEAVE NO TRAIL!

By
**MARVIN J.
JONES**



Danny's gun made a tight arc, stabbing flame.

Coffin-makers and undertakers started a twenty-four-hour work-day when rancher Danny Owen set a corpse to hold a dead man's watch, and baited a man-trap with his own life's blood!

DANNY OWEN reined in his bronc, blue eyes dazed and his jaw slacking off like a hinged brick. He wagged his head from side to side, his gaze travelling up and down the new barb-wire fence that effectively divided Danny's Rolling R graze from the Rolling R water.

Now Danny knew why so many cattle had been making the long trek from the south range to water at the muddy drip of a pool on

the west section. Also, why some of them carried fresh cuts and scratches on their leathery hides. Danny brought his jaw up into place and held it there so firmly that his good-natured mouth thinned out and lumps of muscle gathered along the bone. His blue eyes grew cloudy. He kicked his bronc into a lope and rode up to the fence.

As he got there, a horse and rider broke clear of a screening cluster of scrub oak and trotted up to the other side of the fence. Danny's face wiped clear of all expression as he recognized the rider. He reined in at the fence and waited for the other to come close.

The approaching rider sat his horse with poker-backed arrogance. It was Lars Holden, owner of the adjoining Cross Crescent, a thick-waisted, square-shouldered man with a block of a face and granite eyes. He reined in carelessly, but the cruel bit he used set his giant black back on its haunches.

"Homesteading?" Danny asked him, wryness twisting one corner of his mouth.

Lars Holden stared back at Danny, no anger in his cold eyes. He rolled a cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and then took it out—with his left hand.

"Times are changing, Owen," he said bluntly. Then he put the cigar back in his mouth and held it there, puffing at it slowly, his eyes boring into Danny's.

Danny looked at Lars, right hand resting carelessly on the saddle horn, the reins between the blunt fingers. He looked at the left hand that held the cigar to the Cross Crescent owner's lips and at the low-slung, tied-down holster on Holden's thick, left leg. Out of the corners of his eyes, Danny saw something else, too—a momentary flash of sun against metal a scant hundred yards to the left, in a boulder pile. Danny folded his hands on his saddle horn and grinned mirthlessly.

"Times haven't changed so much that you can fence off another man's water, Holden," he told Lars grimly. "What's the idea?"

Disappointment came briefly to Holden's square face. He tossed the cigar away.

"It's going to be a dry summer, Owen. I've got to look out after my own interests," he answered crisply.

"You have to build a fence to protect them?"

Holden shrugged. "You have another water hole," he reminded Danny.

Danny's smile was not pleasant and anger made his voice dry. "You know it dries up, Lars. I've got to have the use of this one. It's never gone dry and the two ranches have been using it for years. You have no more right fencing me off from it than I would have fencing you off. I won't stand still for it. I can't!"

The Cross Crescent owner's shoulders moved again. He raised his left hand, pushed

his hat back and rubbed gently at his forehead with his fingertips.

"The fence stays, Owen," he said brusquely.

The two men eyed each other for moments and then Holden jerked his big black around and loped off, back the way he had come, passing the scrub oaks and heading on toward the Cross Crescent ranch building, miles away.

DANNY watched him go, his hands still folded on the saddle horn. He looked down across the fence at the blood-specked foam that had fallen from the black horse's mouth and then again at the blocky figure receding in the distance. Danny's face was hard, and worried lines creased at his forehead. He reined his bronc around in a slow turn, and as he did, his eyes caught the tell-tale glint of metal from the boulder pile, for the second time. That metallic gleam, coupled with Lefty's careless actions, meant but one thing to Danny. He gave no indication that he had seen anything as he rode away.

Once Danny had topped a rise and descended into a gulley, he urged his mount into a lope, turned sharply to the right and bent low in the saddle. Circling around, he came up against the cliff wall, several hundred yards from where he had seen the sun reflect from the gun barrel. He tied the bronc to a scrub oak, ducked under the fence and wormed his way from hollow to hollow, boulder to boulder, until the sound of voices reached him. The .45 hugging Danny's leg whispered against the leather as he drew it free and stepped around an outcropping of rock.

Two men sat crosslegged in the shade of a boulder. Their mounts were tethered in a niche in the cliff wall. A blanket was spread between the men and one of them, heavy-shouldered and swarthy, dealt from a greasy deck of cards. Danny recognized both men. They were Cross Crescent hands—new ones. Danny had done some idle wondering about them when he had first seen them in town. Now he understood. Holden had added them to the well-staffed Cross Crescent for just this job.

"Hell, he won't fight, Whip," the swarthy man was saying, in a heavy voice. "Didn't you see the way he sat there and took it and then rode away. He was licked from the start."

"He's got to fight!" Whip Randal argued. His voice was thin and reedy, like his body. His sallow face twisted as he looked at the cards he had drawn. "The only other water he's got is one measly little mudhole. Like Lars says, he'll be down here tonight and tear that fence down."

The swarthy man laughed. "Start to tear the fence down!" he corrected. He made his discard and reached out one great paw for the deck. He was known as Beef Barlow and

was well named. He had a short, heavy body and sloping, muscular shoulders.

Danny eared the hammer back on his .45 and stepped into view.

"Easy, gents," he said grimly as the two men began to scramble to their feet.

Whip Randal raised both skinny arms to their full length, his sallow face slack with fear. Beef Barlow stared for an instant and his right hand tensed. Danny grinned coldly at him and Barlow's thick paw relaxed and his arms slowly went skyward, dark face going darker as the blood rushed to it.

"You think you're pretty cute, Owen, don't you? Sneaking around like a coyote to get behind our backs!"

Danny laughed at him. "Unbuckle your belts—easy like," he told them grimly. "And kick them over this way. The party isn't over; it's just starting." He watched them steadily as the two men surlily complied. Then he edged around them and picked up one of the two Winchesters that leaned against a boulder. He looked it over critically and then holstered the .45. He herded the two men out of the boulder pile.

"I want that fence torn down," Danny said coldly. He raised the rifle carelessly and pressed the trigger. It cracked sharply and a piece of wood splintered from the end post, where the fence ran across the gap of the valley neck. "From there,"—he levered in another cartridge, swung the muzzle to the opposite end of the fence and splinters flew again—"to there."

Throwing in a third cartridge, he lowered the Winchester and stared grimly at the men. "Get busy," he ordered through clenched teeth.

Beef Barlow opened his mouth to bluster and the bore of the rifle pointed right into it.

"Get this straight," Danny cut in coldly, before the heavy man could speak. "You laid in wait for me—hoping I'd throw down on Holden and give you an excuse to cut me

down. I know that Holden hired you just to run this particular shenanigan on me. You'll tear down that wire, drag it over to the gorge and push it over the edge—and act like you like it! And if either one of you comes within rifle range of this water hole after today, I'll shoot first and express my sorrow later. Now, get going!"

Winchester in the crook of his arm, Danny squatted on his haunches in the shade of a boulder and watched while the cursing, sweating men tore and pried the wire from the posts and coiled it into awkward rolls. He supervised while they mounted, hauled the rolls to the lip of the gorge and pushed them over the edge. Then he took the mounts and weapons of the two men and took them back to the water hole, leaving Barlow and Randal to hoof a good mile. Danny was grinning as he rode away. If he was any judge, it was going to be some time before the hands of the two men healed sufficiently to be of much use to Lars Holden as gunhands.

Danny went homeward at a brisk trot, squinting a calculating eye at the sun as it began its downward sweep through the western sky. What breeze there had been, died away and a dry stillness settled over the rolling grazelands. Suddenly, far to Danny's rear, came two faint, flat sounds that were unmistakably shots. Danny reined in sharply and turned in the saddle, frowning at the series of rises that obstructed his view.

There was no repetition of the sounds. Danny hesitated a moment and then wheeled the bronc around and started back at an easy gallop. When he topped the last rise, before reaching the water hole, Danny dismounted and wormed his way up to the crest and carefully looked over the end of the valley. There was no one in sight. Mounting again, Danny spurred the bronc on down to the water hole and cautiously circled the boulder pile where he had surprised Barlow and Whip Randal playing cards. He saw nothing and drew no

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE

* **F-N TEST?**



*The Famous
Finger Nail Test

1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head. —if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.

YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK
LIKE THIS WITH NEW

**WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL**

2 Only a Little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or toilet goods counter.



CREAM-OIL CHARLIE
SAYS: "IT CONTAINS
LANOLIN!"

3 TUNE IN... 2
NETWORK
SHOWS! "The
Adventures of
Sam Spade" Sun.
evenings, CBS
Network. "King
Cole Trio Time"
Sat. afternoons,
NBC Network.



fire. Puzzled, Danny rode boldly among the rocks and searched them thoroughly.

Slowly and still frowning, Danny rode to the gorge and dismounted at the lip. As he peered over the edge, the breath caught in his throat. The sprawled bodies of Beef Barlow and Whip Randal lay beside the rolls of wire. Quickly, Danny slid down the steep slope. There was no question about it. Both men were dead—shot through the heart.

Danny squatted down beside the bodies, the lines in his face deepening and hardening as he rolled and smoked a cigarette. When it was finished, Danny rolled and began to smoke another. The shadows were creeping across the bottom of the gorge, but the lines in Danny's face were beginning to fade. In sudden decision, he crushed the cigarette under his boot heel and cast a speculative eye at the bodies of the two men, then at the side of the gorge. There was a cold smile on Danny's lips as he tightened his belt.

IT WAS a haggard Danny that limped about the ranch house the next morning, getting together a late breakfast. When he had eaten, Danny saddled and started toward town. He had gotten no more than a mile on his way when two approaching horsemen appeared on the trail ahead, coming his way. The cold smile was back on Danny's lips as he jogged forward to meet them.

One of the riders, stiff as a ramrod in the saddle, could be only Lars Holden. The other, with an oversized Stetson crammed down to his ears and elbows moving with the slow flap of wings, was the bantam rooster figure of Sheriff Bundy.

The two men came up, Sheriff Bundy reining in with an air of dignity and importance, and Lars Holden setting his black back on its haunches with the cruel bit.

"Morning, gents," Danny said evenly. He sat his saddle carelessly, but his hand lay lean and brown against the faded right thigh of his Levi's.

Lars Holden returned Danny's stare, his pale eyes veiled by the smoke from the cigar clenched between his strong teeth. Sheriff Bundy inflated his pidgeon breast and his Adam's apple gave two quick jumps as he answered.

"Morning, Danny," he said importantly. He drew his chin down to cover his thin neck and thrust the points of his shoulders forward so that his thin arms bowed over the two guns slung at his thighs. "Where you going?" he demanded.

Danny stared at him with a detached, polite interest, not answering, his eyes cold and unwavering. The blood rose slowly to the lawman's face, but his hooded eyes shifted uneasily to his companion.

"Where are my men, Owen?" Lars Holden asked bluntly, around the cigar.

Danny didn't answer that either. There was a little silence and then Danny spoke, a dangerous edge in his voice.

"If you gents got a play to make—make it," he suggested gently. "First you ask me something that isn't any of your business and then ask me something that isn't any of mine. You got to do better or the conversation is going to come to a standstill."

Sheriff Bundy's Adam's apple bobbed angrily in his neck, but his hands stayed away from the twin guns. Holden took the cigar from his mouth and rolled it between thick fingers.

"We're looking for Barlow and Randal. I left them guarding the fence last night. Their horses showed up at the ranch this morning, but they didn't." Holden hesitated and then went on. There was no anger in his voice. "I went out looking for them. I saw the fence was gone—so I called in the sheriff. Anything wrong in that?"

"Not yet," said Danny.

"I'm just investigating it, that's all," Sheriff Bundy said in an aggrieved tone.

"I don't want to keep you," Danny said politely. He reined his bronc to one side so that the two men could pass.

Lars Holden nodded curtly and touched spurs to the giant black. The stallion lunged with the spurs, then reared against the bit. When his forelegs came down, Danny stared into the muzzle of Holden's .45.

"Hell!" said Danny calmly. "That wouldn't have fooled anybody."

Lars Holden shrugged. "Get his gun," he ordered the sheriff.

The lawman reined his mount around behind Danny and took the gun from Danny's holster with nervous fingers.

"Now," the Cross Crescent owner said, with heavy significance, mouthing his cold cigar, "we'll find out what happened to my men."

A half-hour later, the three men stood at the edge of the gorge and looked down on the scene below. The sheriff gaped incredulously, but it was Lars Holden that Danny watched. For the first time since Danny had known him, the Cross Crescent owner lost his composure.

"W-well," Sheriff Bundy finally stuttered, his throat bobbing spasmodically. "There's one of 'em." He added hesitantly as neither of the other men spoke. "He looks dead."

"Kinda," Danny said. He grinned wryly.

"That's Barlow, but where's Whip Randal?" Lars Holden asked. There was an odd, worried note in his voice and his eyes narrowed a little as he looked at Danny.

"Why, I dunno," Danny returned blandly. "Is he supposed to be here?"

Blood flooded Holden's face. He started to

make an impassioned retort, but instead, he tightened his lips around the cigar.

Sheriff Bundy cleared his throat. "It looks kind of bad for you, Danny," he said hesitantly. "What with the fence being tore down and all, and Beef Barlow salivated and thrown down there with the wire. I guess I'll have to place you in custody until I investigate this thing. You say you sent Randal along with Barlow to guard this fence?" he asked puzzledly, turning to Lars Holden.

"That's right," the Cross Crescent owner answered crisply.

The scrawny lawman scratched his nose. "Well, I wonder what happened to him," he said frowning.

Danny laughed shortly. "It looks kind of simple to me," he told the sheriff. "Barlow and Randal had an argument over something. Whip Randal shot him and then vamoosed."

Sheriff Bundy tugged his hat down viciously and scratched his nose again.

"If I'd shot Barlow, Randal would have reported it by now," Danny went on smoothly.

"What about the fence, though?" the sheriff wanted to know. "How come they tore that down?"

"Oh, I supervised that little job last night," Danny answered serenely. "I sneaked up and got the drop on them and made them take it down. Probably, after I left, they got to arguing about whose fault it was. Whip Randal beat Barlow to the draw and killed him. Then, rather than go back and face Holden here—or maybe stand trial for murder—why he just up and lit out for parts unknown. That's the way I see it."

HOLDEN'S face had a purplish tinge. He spat the cigar from his mouth and picked his way down the slope to where the body of Beef Barlow lay amid the tangle of barbed wire. Danny and the sheriff watched as he prowled around the bottom. There was a tight smile on Danny's lips when he saw the Cross Crescent owner suddenly stiffen and then bend over to examine something he had found. In a moment, Holden came scrambling up the bank, breathing heavily, his face gray. Agitation lay along the muscles of his jaw and in the nervous movement of his hands, but his voice was as crisp and cool as ever.

"Whip Randal was down there," he said, biting off each word. "There's a trail of blood leading along the gorge and then up the bank. Randal must have been wounded bad from the looks of it."

"Well, what do you know!" Danny said, his forehead creasing into a frown.

Sheriff Bundy was bent over the blood trail like a rooster over a worm.

"Looks like he's headed toward your place, Lars," he said excitedly.

"You take Owen on back to town and lock him up," Holden ordered brusquely. "If my boys get wind of this, they'll string him up in nothing flat. Not that it wouldn't be the best way," he added coldly. "I'll trail Randal down and see if he's still alive."

"That makes sense to me," Sheriff Bundy said nervously. He looked in the direction of the Cross Crescent ranch, as though he expected to see a mass of riders pouring over the hill and rob him of his chance to parade down Main street with his prisoner. "I'll be right back out soon's I lock Danny here up. C'mon, boy, let's get going."

"Right with you, Pop," Danny answered indifferently and swung into the saddle.

Danny and Sheriff Bundy left Holden trying to unravel the trail over the hard ground and started back to town.

"You ride ahead of me," the lawman ordered importantly. "Not that I think you'd try to escape, but it's my duty not to take no chances."

"Sure," Danny said agreeably.

They topped a rise and then another. As they descended the slope of the second and reached the bottom of a ravine, Danny reined in suddenly, swearing his amazement.

"Look!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Randal must have circled around and headed for town." He leaned over in the saddle, examining the ground carefully.

Sheriff Bundy drew abreast eagerly, stretching out his long neck, eyes seeking the trail that Danny had claimed to find. It was his turn to swear in amazement, as he felt one of his twin .45's jump from its holster.

"Hey!" he said weakly.

Danny grinned over the barrel of the sheriff's weapon and the lawman's arms jumped into the air. Danny slipped the other .45 from the holster, and plucked his own Colt from the sheriff's waistband. Anger brought the lawman's chest out and puffed at his red cheeks.

"After I save you from being lynched, you play a low-down trick on me," he complained bitterly. "I treat you like a gent and—and—"

"Easy does it," Danny grinned, and then crispness came into his voice. "Look, Sheriff. It strikes me that we can find Randal and clear this thing up in a jiffy and save you and me both a lot of trouble. Now, I'll give you back your guns, if you'll string along with me on a plan I got. You feel agreeable?"

"You—" began the lawman angrily, and then cunning came into his eyes. "All right," he agreed, too quickly. He reached out for the guns.

Danny ignored the other's outstretched hands. He reined in close and thrust the guns back into the sheriff's holsters.

"Let's go," Danny said, wheeling his bronc,

"I got a hunch we can find something interesting over near the Cross Crescent."

Danny slapped the flank of the sheriff's mount and the two horses started off at a gallop, with Danny guiding them in a wide circle around the ill-fated water hole and gorge. An hour's hard riding brought them out on the far side of the Cross Crescent ranch buildings. Over Sheriff Bundy's wailing objections, Danny forced him to dismount in a canyon and the two picked their way to the top of a crest that overlooked the buildings.

"What in tarnation are you up to?" demanded the sheriff, as he lay panting beside Danny and stared down upon the Cross Crescent, then added in amazement. "Look! Who's that?"

The sheriff pointed a quivering finger at a rise a hundred yards to their right. The figure of a man lay at the top of the rise, full length, on his belly. A Winchester was fitted to his shoulder.

"That's Whip Randal," Danny explained calmly. "He's got a little grudge to settle with Holden."

Sheriff Bundy's Adam's apple bobbed with agitation. "You mean to say you're going to sit here and watch someone get shot and not do anything about it?" he demanded.

"That's right," Danny agreed serenely. "And so are you," he added grimly as the lawman attempted to get to his feet again.

"Look here—" Sheriff Bundy blustered and then subsided when Danny's hand tightened on his arm.

"Watch!" Danny ordered tensely.

A RIDER had appeared over a ridge to their right and behind where Whip Randal lay. For a few moments, both horse and rider were motionless against the skyline. Suddenly the horseman ducked low in the saddle and wheeled his mount back over the rise and out of sight.

"Wasn't that Lars Holden?" Sheriff Bundy asked puzzledly.

"It was," Danny answered grimly.

"What'd he duck back for when he seen us?" the lawman wanted to know.

"He didn't see us. He saw Whip Randal," Danny explained patiently.

"Then he thinks Whip is laying for him," Sheriff Bundy said excitedly.

"That's exactly what he thinks," Danny admitted.

The lawman frowned thoughtfully. "You know," he said finally, "there's something awfully funny about this. I wonder if—"

Sheriff Bundy broke off. There was a movement on the ridge again and the head and shoulders of the Cross Crescent owner appeared. There was the glint of sunlight on a

rifle barrel, then three quick puffs of smoke blossomed from the ridge.

The lawman swore his astonishment. It was apparent that the shots had been fired at the motionless figure of Whip Randal.

"That was murder!" exploded Sheriff Bundy. "Cold-blooded murder!"

"He made sure that time!" Danny said grimly. The figure of Whip Randal lay sprawled in the same position, but the rifle barrel now slanted toward the sky. "C'mon," Danny ordered the lawman. "We'll double back and come up the rise from the other side."

The two men wormed their way out of the boulders and ran along the ravine until they came to the point opposite the ridge where Whip Randal's body lay. Cautiously they climbed the ridge. As they reached the top they saw Lars Holden bending over Whip's body. He had laid his Winchester aside. He straightened as his ear caught the sound of their footsteps and whirled, his face contorted with bewilderment and anger.

"Hi!" greeted Danny casually, and then added politely, "Did you get him?"

"It was him or me," Holden said crisply. "He was lying in wait for me. God only knows why."

"I know why," Danny said softly.

Lars Holden straightened again and then whirled with startling suddenness. Danny's arm had already started moving. It made a tight arc and as it came up, flame stabbed roaringly into Holden's face.

The Cross Crescent owner dropped the gun he had plucked from the dead man's holster and his hand moved upward as though to cover his face. It never reached there. His body suddenly relaxed and crumpled and he fell backward over Whip Randal's stiff form.

"He didn't fool me that time either," Danny remarked with quiet satisfaction.

"T-tell me about it," he said finally.

"Well," Danny said thoughtfully. "He hired these two hardcase jiggers just on purpose to run me off my spread. When they muffed the fence deal, he shot them, knowing I'd get the blame."

Sheriff Bundy frowned. "That's why he insisted on trailing Randal alone when it turned out Whip was only wounded, huh?"

"When he thought Whip Randal had been wounded," Danny corrected. "He killed them both dead enough. I packed Whip over here on my horse and set him up in that position."

"But dead men don't bleed," he objected. "Whose trail was that leaving the gorge?"

"That was me—in Whip's boots," Danny said calmly. He rolled up his sleeve and pushed a strip of cloth back from his forearm. "I just nicked a vein and let a little drip out."

BIG EFF'S PEACEFUL BATTLE CALL

Neither the snarl of lead nor the flash of deadly range-hog guns could lure Big Eff Ade's peaceful soul from its somnolence. . . . Until an outlaw bullet drew blood from the hide of his favorite mule, Tequila, and turned that war-dodging well-digger into a blood-mad, sledge-hammer killer!

Big Eff poised for a moment. Then he flung the hammer at Tober.



By

RUEL McDANIEL

TEQUILA was being contrary again. As Shorty Sims yanked back on the trace-chains to hitch the black-backed, gray-bellied mule to the windlass, the animal stiffened his short, powerful hind legs and refused to budge.

"Hitchin' him up ten minutes early," Big Eff Ade grinned, "an' the rascal don't like it. Can't say I blame 'im much, but Rattler's petered out. Nothin' else to do."

Big Eff placed a powerful arm on each side of the mule's neck, right against his shoulders. Without even a grunt, he lifted the mule's front feet six or eight inches clear of the ground and shoved him suddenly back.

"You hadn't oughta strain yoreself that-away," Shorty admonished. "We ain't in that big a hurry."

"Shucks." Big Eff's red mustache quivered with his grin. "'Twarn't no strain. Tequila don't weigh more'n seven hun'ed pounds. He's jest a little critter. But he's the best water-well mule in Texas!" He slapped the animal's rump lightly and patted him along the back. "Mighty loyal animal—for a mule."

Big Eff stopped short. He shaded his eyes and gazed at a horse and rider, motionless atop a small mesa, about a third of a mile away. "Looks bad," he mumbled, wiping sweat from his wide forehead with a bare hand nearly as big as a skillet. "Think that's a J-T rider. Wish Harm 'ud come on in."

By the time they lowered the twelve-inch, octagon-sided cypress curbing to the bottom of the hole and slid the boring bit back down, Harm Saddler rode up.

"I'm a worryin' some," Big Eff complained to Harm, owner of the little, down-at-the-heels Double-Five spread. He told the rancher about the rider. "Purty sure he was a J-T spy."

Deep lines showed in the lean cheeks of Harm Saddler, and worry and loss of sleep registered around his sunken-looking eyes. "Could be," he sighed. "I left three of our boys at the dam, firing away. So far it's worked. Maybe Jake's getting wise—all that firing and no effort to storm his dam. How much longer 'fore the well'll be down, Eff?" He talked in a dreary voice that reminded the big well-driller of a dog barking at a knot.

BIG EFF ADE was the biggest man in the brasada. And the gentlest. Worry-lines roped his big face, showing through the red stubble that grew nearly up to his soft, blue eyes. He was no cowman, only a well digger; but he'd seen little men buck big outfits before, and pity touched him as he looked upon the worry-gripped face of Harm Saddler, a two-bit rancher down to his last trick. Suffering on a man's face cut him like a two-edged blade and his eyes touched Saddler and brought back something of the little cattleman's desperation in this final moment.

Big Eff looked at the departing sun, drawing water as if mocking Shorty Sims and his thirst-crazed herd. He rubbed his great palms together and urged Tequila to a faster pace.

"If we hit water at eighty feet, like we figured, and we don't have no set-backs, water should be gushin' outa this hole this time tomorrow. And it won't be a minute too soon. Them old mossy-backs that shy at a human

a mile away been nosin' right up amongst us and lickin' the wet sand we haul outer the hole. Them cows gone far as they can without water, Harm."

Saddler's shoulders slumped. "I know. Found four dead calves on the bank of the dry creek this mornin'. Cattle lyin' in the soft mud of the creek bed, lookin' up at me with the whites of their eyes wallin' around. And bawlin' at me. It's enough to break a man's heart, Eff. And the way Jake Tober's settin' back and gloatin'. That makes a man want to kill!" Harm's shoulders stiffened and there was fire in his dark eyes now that Eff hadn't seen in a week.

"It's water by tomorrow night or nothin', Eff. The cattle are too weak to drive to any market—if there was any. Jake Tober's squat-tin' up there at his fancy headquarters, waitin' for me to crawl to him and accept his offer of two dollars a head all 'round for my herd. I'd as soon die. But I can't set by and see the cattle suffer much longer!" He flexed his arms and his fists opened and closed.

Jake Tober himself removed all doubt as to the identity of the rider atop the little mesa. Flanked by five of his hired gunhawks, he galloped his sixteen-hundred-pound, iron-gray stallion through the beat-out trail of the cactus and prickly-pear jungle and skidded the stallion to a stop at the little clearing made for the well.

"Ha!" he bellowed like a rancher who'd caught his top-hand running a foreign brand on a calf. "So you're drilling you a well? Digging your own water supply. Stubborn, eh? I thought something was loco when you stopped trying to rush my dam and blow it out. Might have known you'd be up to some kind of coyotin' around."

He cut his eyes around at his five henchmen, then he spurred his gray almost against Saddler. "Now get this, you little pack rat. There won't be a well here or anywhere else on this range! I need more space. I'm spreading out. I'm taking over here. That offer's still open today. Tomorrow it won't be. Take it now and clear out, or—" He let it go at that, whirled his mount and thundered back through the cactus-lined trail.

Big Eff Ade stood with his huge feet slightly apart, his high-laced boots as solid and almost as large as foundations for a feed house. He softly fingered the slick handle of a twenty-pound sledgehammer he used about his drilling. Once or twice, while Jake Tober threatened, Big Eff had hefted the hammer with two fingers of his right hand, and his heavy-lidded eyes had shown his thoughts. Rumor had it that Eff once broke a gunman's neck in a saloon brawl with just his thumb and forefinger.

Harm Saddler called Shorty, two of his

riders, and Eff together. "This is the showdown, fellers. This is it. I felt awful sorry for them pore critters out there, with no fresh water in more'n a week. But I'll be a ring-tailed catamount if I'll give 'em over to Jake Tober. If I did, it'd not only be the end of my little spread but the finish of the whole Cactus Creek valley.

"His dam hurts nobody but me now. I happen to be the first spread standin' in his way. When I'm out of the way, it's only a matter of time till he'll not be satisfied. He'll go right on down the valley, taking the springs and branches that water the spreads below here."

Big Eff momentarily stood erect with his great shoulders back, towering six feet eight inches and weighing two hundred eighty-five pounds, with not an ounce of surplus flesh evident. "You're headin' for a showdown fight with Jake. We got nine feet yet to drill, to hit eighty. We've made better'n ten feet a day so far.

"As I told you when we parleyed about drillin' this well in the fust place, I'm a peaceful man. I don't hire out to do nobody's fightin'. But like I told you, I'm packin' a personal reason for helpin' you square things with Jake Tober. So, you and yore boys do the fightin' and I'll do the drillin'."

A MILD shame touched him. Saddler's crew was gun-short and every man was desperately needed if fighting started, Eff well knew. It shamed him that he was backing off. But he had a way of life and that way was against shooting. He'd made a promise to himself a long time ago, and when the thought of breaking that promise entered his brain he was ashamed of that too. Big Eff was, in that moment, a man both ashamed and a little proud. He had looked at his feelings and he knew he was not afraid of Jake Tober or any man, and knowing in this moment that he was not a coward heartened him. Harm Saddler and his men would have to understand. They must understand that it was just as important to keep the drill going as it was to sling lead.

Eff looked off into the wild brush in the direction of the headquarters of Jake Tober's J-T spread. "My guess is, Jake and his gun-hawks'll be back by daylight in the mornin'. Mebbe sooner."

Harm Saddler sighed. "Shorty, ride over and call the three boys in from Tober's dam. No need keeping up the pretense of raiding the dam now. Tober's in on the well. Tell 'em to go by the house and eat, get their bed-rolls and some extra grub. Then ride here. We'll take turns standing guard."

"Gimme one good hand and I'll keep the drill grindin' all night," Big Eff said, warming up to the coming showdown. "We can spade the dirt and mud from the well around a little,

to form a barricade in front of the trail. We—"

"Remember, I got my name on that tall galoot with the yeller hair, Tober's top-hand," Shorty Sims butted in. "He's been wallin' his eyes at my gal. He's my meat!"

Harm Saddler took stock. "We're eight, counting you, Eff. Jake can muster around twenty-two men, with the three new gunmen he imported two weeks ago, right after he finished the dam. It's eight against twenty-two. Pretty hard odds. If any of you men, or any of them at the house, want to withdraw, now's the time. You that will stay—arm yourselves and bring all yore spare shells. We'll be holed up here for a finish fight. Shorty, bring my extra Smith and Wesson for Eff here—"

"Not for me," Big Eff interrupted. "You know I don't have any truck with guns. My Pa died 'cause he built a reputation as a gun-slick. It got to where every gun-fanner he brushed with had a hankerin' to test Pa's draw. Like Pa always said, you never get so fast with a gun that some hombre don't come along sooner or later who's a little faster. Pa knowed he was gonna die by the gun. He kept tellin' me never to have no truck with guns. I'll keep the drill turnin'. You boys do the shootin'."

DAWN drove the darkness from the depths of the brasada and the denizens of the night scampered to the security of the jungle of cactus, scrub oak and mesquite. Half the crew had been on guard around the drilling-site all night, and now the other four men rode down the lane between thick jungle undergrowth into the circular opening beat out of the thicket for the well.

A shallow hole had been scooped out near the well-site, for a water tank when the water started to flow from artesian depths. The soft dirt from this hole, plus flat which had come from the thirteen-inch hole provided reasonably safe protection from attack.

"When they come at us, it'll just about have to be from down the trail," Harm Saddler reasoned. "No man can go far in that prickly-pear and cactus thicket."

"Not if he expects to set down to his meals, anytime soon," Shorty put in.

Big Eff Ade had not closed his eyes all night. With one of Saddler's men, he had kept the drill gouging deeper and deeper into the alluvial loam. The last haul-out had showed wet sand on the drill bit. Eff had predicted water at any moment. It looked as though Jake Tober had decided to let the well come in, after all.

"Ain't like Jake," Harm reasoned. "Feared he's got somethin' up his sleeve. He ain't a man to take defeat layin' down."

"You're right. Look who's comin'," Big Eff

said dryly. His eyes suddenly slitted and hardened.

Now halted in the trail forty yards from the well were Jake Tober and at least ten men, each swinging a Winchester across the saddle in front of him.

"You got exactly two minutes to unhitch that mule and get your crew away from there!" Jake bellowed through cupped hands. Tober was a stockily-built man about thirty-five who had come back from the Civil War with a determination to be the biggest cattleman in the brasada. He moved his hands nervously and kept touching his black mustache.

Big Eff settled himself in the slush-pit near the hole, where he could watch the drill turning and keep Tequila moving steadily in the circular, beaten-out path around the hole. He saw Harm Saddler signal his seven punchers to ease into the shallow hole behind the protection of the wide circle of fresh dirt.

Eff tapped the rachet around the drill-rod with his sledgehammer.

Harm Saddler said, "We aim to finish this well. Better stay out of our way!"

Jake Tober shot first. His bullet whined off the slick wooden drum of the windlass. "Shoot 'em down—like lobos!" he yelled to his men.

The J-T gunmen leaped from their rearing mounts and ducked into crevices in the trail. Tober squatted on his haunches and peered from around a scrub-oak and fired again. Six other guns roared in a volley.

Tequila leaped at the sound of the firing. He jerked the windlass pole frantically around, kicking and pawing, until he knew he couldn't run away from the commotion. Then he stopped directly behind the windlass and the well-shaft and refused to budge an inch.

It suddenly came to Big Eff that his prized drilling mule was exposed to the fire. He dashed out, unhooked his traces and slapped him harshly across the rump with the lead-rope. The mule leaped into the shallow hole, walked over and nose-nudged Rattler, the other mule.

Lead thudded into the windlass-drum, the protruding well-curb, the cypress timber by the side of the well. Other bullets buried themselves harmlessly in the soft dirt, kicking particles into the faces of the Saddler riders.

"Take it slow," Harm cautioned his men. "Make every shot count. This may go on all day. When you see a galoot's body move, let him have it. Don't shoot at shadows!"

After the first three or four volleys, the attacking fire died down to an occasional shot. Eff could see by the movement of the brush along the edge of the trail that the gang was jockeying for better position. He knew the brasada, though, and he knew going through the brush and prickly-pears would be slow and painful at best.

Suddenly two guns roared from the opposite direction. Eff flung his huge body around. He saw the tops of dwarf mesquite shaking. Some of the J-T gang had crawled through the thicket from upcreek. Probably, Eff thought, that explained the attack's delay. They had not expected it later than daybreak. Tober evidently had waited until these men had beat a trail around behind the well. Eff recalled now that he had heard faint noises in the brush during the night and cursed himself for not investigating. He'd supposed it was a cougar or a coon on the prowl.

The firing from upstream had forced Saddler's men to dive for cover in the center of the shallow tank excavation. From this position, they were at a disadvantage in firing themselves.

Now the lead came in fierce volleys from one vantage point to another nearer the well. "They're closin' in," he muttered.

He knew he should be working on the well; but no animal could circle the hole, exposed as the path was, without being hit. Sure, he hired out to drill a well for Harm Saddler, and by bringing in water today, he could save Saddler's cattle and square an old debt he'd been holding a long time against Jake Tober. But he couldn't bring himself to expose his mules to fire from two sides. It was dangerous enough for the animals as it was, with their backs exposed, and their heads bobbing up and down above the barricade now and then. The situation was bad.

A J-T gunman arrogantly hunkered over right in the middle of the trail and aimed. Before he could pull trigger, a slug from Shorty's rifle set him back on his heels. Then he slowly folded up and the gun slipped from his hands. "That'll teach you to fool around with my gal!" Shorty snorted.

Another J-T man slithered from the brush, clutched the dying man under the shoulders and started pulling him to safety. "Hold your fire," Harm ordered. "Let 'im pull the feller to the shade."

The two men in the brush upcreek were doing the most damage. Their lead was zooming low overhead and whining off the metal of the machinery, and they were so hidden in the dense brush that nobody could get a close shot at them. One of their bullets whined off the metal collar of the drill-holder and thudded into the ground right by Eff's knee. He looked at the spot and rubbed his reddish-stubbed chin.

Suddenly the firing stopped. For fifteen minutes not a shot had sounded from either side of the clearing. "They're up to something," Saddler muttered grimly. "I can see a brush move now and then. They ain't quit-tin' yet. Keep yore damned eyes peeled, fellers!"

TIME WAS precious. Big Eff knew Jake Tober could profit by a delay, while Saddler's cattle died for want of the water that lay, cool and lifegiving, down there at the edge of his drill-bit. No, Harm Saddler couldn't afford to play a waiting game—not unless the bit was boring nearer and nearer to life-saving water.

Eff stalked out, led the protesting Tequila back to the pole and hitched his traces. He slapped the little mule gently across the rump and the drill started revolving again.

The drill had been turning for maybe half an hour, without molestation from the J-T outfit on either side.

Then it happened!

Yelling men sprang from the thicket at the very lips of the clearing. They closed in on two sides—the two men from upcreek and ten from the trail.

They dove in, swinging low and weaving as they fired. Peter Chafin, a Saddler rider, went down in the first volley. A slug caught Saddler in the fleshy part of his left arm.

Eff plunged out to unhitch Tequila and a slug sent his small-brimmed black hat sailing over the embankment. "This here's gettin' unfunny," he grumbled.

Tequila was almost in the cross-fire. He reared and pawed the air with his fore-feet. He bawled and kicked at the single-tree that held his traces. The chains clattered with the punishment. "You hurt that mule and I'll—"

Eff didn't finish. From the trail side six men scampered over the embankment. Eff spotted Jake Tober. Tober's pistol roared and Tequila squealed and sent the pole spinning. Eff glanced wildly back and saw blood gush from the mule's hip.

Big Eff stood there a moment, a giant of strength, unmindful of the lead that filled the air around him. He felt a jarring in his body. His brain was a tumult and he found his thoughts a muddle of madness.

The yells of the men on both sides were far away and of no consequence. It was if he had seen all this a long time ago.

His eyes blinked wide, seeing only one thing—the angry gash across the hip of his Tequila. The little mule bawled in mortal fear and pain. And the sound of the mule's hurt touching his ears turned a disk in his mind. Only one thing mattered now.

Jake Tober had shot his mule. Jake Tober must pay!

Something like the roar of a volcano about to erupt broke from deep in Big Eff's throat. He reached down, seized his sledgehammer and straightened in a single movement.

He drew back his right hand, poised for a fraction of a second and threw the hammer.

The steel butt of it caught Jake Tabor in the face, right at the base of his nose. It lifted his feet off the ground and sent him soaring back over the embankment. His face spread to the width of Eff's two hands and blood painted the embankment. Eff knew the man was dead when he hit the ground.

Jake's men knew it too, evidently, for they scampered back at once from the withering fire of Saddler and his men. Two went down and did not move. A third dragged himself over the bank with one leg limp and useless. In less than a minute, the fight was over as suddenly as it had started.

"Whew!" Harm Saddler exclaimed as the last of the J-T gunmen scampered down the trail to their mounts.

"Thought you wouldn't kill a man," Harm said to Eff.

"I didn't say I wouldn't kill. Said I didn't use a gun. Besides, the low-down skunk shot Tequila!"

Tequila's wound was not fatal. Eff unhitched him and moved Rattler into the traces. While Saddler and his men patched their own wounds and attended the wounded J-T hands, Big Eff was making hole. By mid-afternoon pure, life-giving artesian water was gushing out of the hole and filling the tank. Cattle fought for a place at the tank.

"That kinda evens the score with Jake Tober," Big Eff sighed as he relaxed and ate red beans from a coffee cup and drank coffee from the water pail. "He pulled a stunt about like this on my brother, Oliver, up on the Frio eight years ago. I been layin' for him since, 'cause the loss of his spread so near killed Oliver, who was sick anyhow, that he died three months later. It's the same as if Tober'd murdered him."

Big Eff stood up and stretched. He yawned as he looked over the embankment and viewed his victim. Then he picked up his sledgehammer. "Shucks," he complained, "got my hammer all messed up."

Frontier Businessman

WHAT IS believed to have been the first toll bridge in California led over a flooded stream between Hangtown (now Placerville), and Diamond Springs, in El Dorado County.

During the winter of 1850, with heavy rains making travel virtually impossible, a huge tree fell in such a manner as to form a shaky footbridge across the flood-swollen creek bed. Seeing the possibilities of the situation, an ambitious miner camped at one end of the tree and charged fifty cents for permission to cross.

—Neil Murberger



Chapter I

KILLER'S WELCOME

THE SUDDEN burst of gunfire somewhere up Pine Gulch's crowded main street barely penetrated the rhythmic clangor that filled Dave Gray's blacksmith shop. Nor did it change the steady swing of the heavy hammer in his brawny hand. The glowing horseshoe on the anvil rapidly took shape under his experienced handling. He studied it a moment.

"Election fever's growing," Dave said, raising his voice. "If I was sheriff, nobody would

ride into town today without checking his guns."

Shorty Dodson, Dave's helper, carefully tapped the iron rim on a huge wagonwheel. Turning his grimy face toward Dave, he said, "If you was sheriff, a lot of people wouldn't be wearin' guns today."

Dave made no answer. Seeing the sudden, rigid lines appear on his square-jawed face, Shorty turned back to his work. Spearing the hot shoe with his tongs, Dave plunged it into the water barrel. He stood there, watching the dirty water boil and listening to its sizzle.

Why don't they leave me alone, he thought

Gripping Novelette
of a
Blackleg's Finish
Fight!



The owlhoot gun that had made Dave Gray's name legend in that quick-death country had lain unused for three peaceful years. Then that boot-tough blacksmith strapped it once more to his thigh, pinned a sheriff's star on his chest, and set out to render to stern frontier law its rightful due—the corpse of his reckless killer brother!

Owlhoot Lawman's Last War



He didn't remember drawing his .45, but it was there, thundering and bucking in his hand.

grimly. When I hung up my guns, I meant it for good. I told them so, even if they did laugh at me. I've made every one of them eat crow these past three years. Still, they're watching, talking, hoping. They want to see Dave Gray end up like his brother, Curly. They'll never get that pleasure. I promised Nan—

Light boots made a scuffling beat on the plank walk outside the shop. Dave turned, a smile breaking over his dark face at the familiar sound. Billy Blaine, his kid brother-in-law, was in a hurry as usual.

The smile faded at sight of the tow-headed youngster who raced through the big door. Every big freckle on Billy's white face showed prominently. Tears lurked in his wide eyes. He paused inside the smoky shop, spotted Dave's tall figure and stumbled towards him.

"Dad—Dad—" he cried shrilly, clutching at Dave's leather apron. "He—he's bad hurt! They took him to the doctor's office! He wants you, Dave!"

SHERIFF BEN BLAINE was Billy's father. Remembering the gunshots of a few minutes ago, Dave did not bother with questions. A shooting had been inevitable. An attempt on the lawman's life was long overdue.

Dave unbuckled his apron and hung it on its peg back of the forge. He pulled his flat-topped sombrero down over his straight black hair. He strode up the street, worming his muscular arms and chest into the shirt that he always shucked while working. Even in cowman's boots, his long Levi-clad legs ate up distance with astonishing ease. Billy ran beside him, short legs pumping to keep up.

The crowd about Doc West's little office opened to let Dave through. He saw their appraising glances; his ears caught the buzz of excited comment that swept over them as he bent his head so that he could enter the door.

Dave braced himself against the mingled smell of fresh blood and pungent antiseptics. Ben Blaine lay stretched out on a table and Doc West hovered over him, gleaming surgical instruments in his hands. Nannette, Dave's wife, sat on a blanket-covered couch against the wall to his right. She stared unseeingly at Dave, her smooth, tanned face turned a dirty gray by the pallor that claimed it. Ralph Ledbetter, the other occupant of the office, managed a thin smile and a curt nod of his blond head.

"How bad, Doc?" Dave asked softly, circling the table opposite the little medico.

"Both arms shattered. One leg." West continued his work without pause. "Ben's suffering from shock and loss of blood. If his heart holds up, he'll make it. It's been acting up these last few years, I don't know—"

Dave said, "Ben musta picked on a gun-

slinger. Ain't everybody can place their slugs that neatly. How's the other fellow?"

Ledbetter cut in, "Ben never got his gun out of leather."

"He's still mighty fast for a man his age." Dave whistled soundlessly. "That gunslinger's good. Anybody I know?"

The lanky Ledbetter eyed Dave queerly. He took his time in answering. "Yeah," he murmured. "You know him. It was your brother, Curly."

Outwardly, Dave took the news without emotion. But inside he turned sick all over. Just hearing the sordid tales about Curley had been bad enough; knowing that he'd come back to town, facing the mute evidence of his wanton handiwork was something else indeed.

"Where's Curly now?" he asked tonelessly.

Ledbetter said, "In the Paradise. Drinking with Max Arnold and his crowd. Max put him on his payroll this morning. Gun wages. Everybody in town's heard about it."

"Except me." Dave circled the table again, headed for the door.

"Dave!" Nan's low husky voice stopped him. "Where are you going?"

"To the Paradise."

She got to her feet and came across the worn carpet to him. Tall, brown-haired, shapely, she could almost look into Dave's eyes without tilting her head. A quiet urgency lay in the touch of her cold fingers on his arm.

"Not yet," she begged. "Not yet. Dad's last words were of you. You've got to be here if he awakens."

"A gunless hero," said Ledbetter, "has no business bracing Max Arnold's outfit. Nan's right. You better stay here."

There was no rancor in the man's words. Dave knew him to be a personal friend of Ben Blaine. He overlooked the personal remark.

"What did Ben want?" he asked, feeling trapped, knowing full well what had been in his father-in-law's mind.

"I don't know." Nan wasn't a good liar. Tell-tale spots of color reddened her cheeks and she stared fixedly at a missing button on his shirt. "He didn't say."

You don't have to lie to me, Nan, Dave thought miserably. I know you love Curly, I knew it when we got married. Curly's such a heller, I thought you'd forget him. All of us would be better off if we could. Now he's come back and shot up your father. He isn't the same Curly you knew, Nan. I wonder if that's beginning to soak into that stubborn head of yours?

Aloud, he said, "All right. I'll stay and talk to Ben."

Doc West finished the job of putting the sheriff's limbs into splints. Dave and Ledbetter carried him into the tiny bedroom behind the office at her father's side.

LEDBETTER showed no desire to leave the office. Sitting there on the couch beside him, Dave pondered the man's reluctance to withdraw. This shooting and the bitter election could be indirectly traced back to the party of homesteaders that Ledbetter had led into Pine Valley two summers ago. Each settler had taken his section siding Buckeye River; the compact little colony had ignored the grim protests of the valley's three powerful cattle barons, Max Arnold, Jake Miessner, and Pike Storey, who grazed their pool herds wherever they pleased. They strung bobwire around their land and went about the job of irrigating it for crops. They began work on a dam which still was unfinished. When the pool riders tried to tear down their fences, the settlers fought them off with guns and sent word to the state capital asking for U. S. government aid.

The governor knew sheriff Ben Blaine well. He asked the old lawman to twist the pool's tail whenever the big outfit got too proddy. And Blaine had done a good job of it—until today.

Ben Blaine had friends, a lot of them. It kept Doc West busy at the front door, barring their entrance and explaining that the sheriff was too ill to see visitors. Dave Gray watched moodily, wondering how many people would show any concern over him if he lay in that back room. Not many, he knew. He could count them on the fingers of one hand.

"How's the election going?" he asked the nester leader idly.

"Voting's light." Ledbetter's voice was somber. "Max Arnold's man will coast in now. Ben won't be on his feet in weeks—if he pulls through this. Hoke Yancey's a cinch to win."

Dave said, "Yancey will make a hell of a sheriff. He isn't fit to stand in Ben's shadow. Your boys won't last long with him riding the law."

Flame danced in Ledbetter's pale eyes. "If it's got to be war," he snapped, "we'll fight. I've expected this. We've hired guns and some of them are in town today. There's more on the way."

"A lot of guns ride for the pool. You think you can lick them?"

"We've got to." A thin brittleness edged the lanky settler's words. "You know our setup, Gray. We located under the Desert Land Act. We paid two-bits an acre to the government for the privilege. The land isn't ours until we pay one dollar an acre more. We had three years to do it in—and we had to start irrigating within that period. That's why we started the dam. Time's growing short. We've got one year left in which to prove up our homesteads. We'll fight to hold them."

"You might've gotten away with fences," Dave mused aloud, "but the dam is something

else. The pool's cows have got the lower end of the valley to water in—provided there's any water to drink."

Ledbetter mumbled, "Our dam will be a boon to the pool. The river dries up to a trickle every summer. We store the water up in Smoky Canyon during the spring run-off and there's plenty for everybody all year around. You've heard our argument."

"Plenty. But the pool has its side too. It was here first, and that means a lot in this country. If your colony's successful, it'll keep growing until it hogs Buckeye from one end of the valley to the other. Yet you can't blame Max Arnold and his pals for fighting back."

Ledbetter pounded on his Levi-clad knee with his big horny fist. "All over the West, the cattle interests are putting up that argument. Civilization is on its way. A few men can't hog all the land. They've got to share it with others. Can't you see that? And it can be done without bloodshed, if only men like Max Arnold would be reasonable."

"Dave." Nan stood in the bedroom door. "Father's awake. You can see him now."

"He shouldn't be talking," warned the doctor. "Just a few words. That's all."

The little medico left the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Dave stepped softly to the bedside. Ben Blaine stared up at him, pain and anxiety clouding his faded eyes.

". . . I didn't think Curly would shoot me. . . ." Dave leaned over so he could hear the old man's labored words ". . . Aimed to put him in jail . . . on that old murder charge. You can stop him, Dave—you got to! No matter what Nan thinks . . . or your own feelings . . . tell Ralph Ledbetter to scratch my name and put yours up—for sheriff. . . ."

Dave looked across the bed at Nan. Her brown eyes flashed, grew stormy. Her lips curved downward. He caught the slight shake of her head.

It's easy for you to say no, he thought. I've been like a gutless rabbit ever since I first saw you. You said that you hated guns, so I put mine away. When Ben wanted to pin a deputy's badge on me, you argued me into saying no. Now he's shot up, maybe dying, and you want me to say no to him again. Yet you love Curly, a heller who wears guns and uses them on your own father. A man can take so much, Nan, and nothing more. I've had enough.

To Ben Blaine, Dave said, "Take it easy, old-timer. If people will have me, I'll take over your job."

Doc West opened the door. "Time's up," he said. "Ben needs plenty of rest."

Dave returned Nan's wide-eyed stare, put his back to her and left the room. Ledbetter still sat on the couch in the office. Dave stopped before him, saying.

"Ben wants me to run for sheriff. What

kind of chance do you think I'll have, Ralph?"

The settler jumped to his feet. Unconcealed joy lay across his craggy face as he pumped Dave's hand in his own horny palm. "You've got a fifty-fifty chance even now, late as it is. A square gunswift is Pine Gulch's only hope. I'm on my way to election headquarters to spread the word."

Chapter II

"COME AND GET IT, LAWDOG!"

DAVE FOUND little Billy sitting disconsolately on the plank walk outside the office. "Your daddy's going to be all right," he told the boy. "How about running down to the shop for me and telling Shorty to close up for the day?"

Billy scuttled away. Dave cut through a vacant lot into the street behind Main. Five minutes brought him to the Blaine home whose roof he had shared since his marriage to Nan. Ben's wife had died some years ago. Instead of moving into their own home, Nan had insisted on staying here and keeping house for her brother and father.

In their bedroom on the second floor of the rambling house, Dave pulled a small trunk from under the four-poster bed. It took him some time to wipe the grease off his cartridge belt and the bone-handled Colt .45. He buckled the belt around his lean waist, tied the holster tip to his leg. The feel of the heavy weapon against his thigh was comforting and familiar.

He tried his draw before the dresser mirror. He was all thumbs at first, no coordination between hands and mind. He kept trying, knowing it would come back. It did. Finally the long-barreled Colt came out of leather like a live thing at his touch.

Funny, he thought bitterly. Just thirty minutes takes me back three years. Back where I started from. Dave Gray, gunhawk, wears his guns again. Dave Gray, blacksmith and citizen, is gone forever.

He left the house, cut back into Main. Ledbetter had wasted no time in spreading the news that he was a candidate for sheriff, he saw. These people had always been watchful and reserved where he was concerned. Now some of them greeted him cordially, others eyed him stonily. All of them drew together in tight little huddles to talk about him after he strode past.

Dave stepped into the hardware store and bought several boxes of cartridges. He punched the brass loads into empty belt loops and inserted five of them in his gun cylinder, carefully leaving the firing pin on an empty. The clerk, a wide-eyed youth, stood behind the counter, gaping at him.

As Dave stepped onto the boardwalk, he

bumped into Ledbetter and several settler comrades.

"We tried to catch you at home," Ledbetter said. "Lucky for us you went in there."

Dave said, "Why?"

Ledbetter met his cold, level gaze. "Nan said you were going after your brother. She asked me to stop you."

"This is personal," Dave said, wondering how Nan had guessed his intentions. "Just Curly and me."

"You wouldn't shoot him—saying you managed to beat his draw?" asked Ledbetter. "Not your own brother?"

"That," said Dave frostily, "is none of your business."

Ledbetter's face reddened. "Sorry. It's the pool I'm thinking about. You jump Curly, you're jumping the pool. Most of that outfit is still in the Paradise, drinking and raising hell. You'd never leave the place alive, Gray. Max Arnold would see to that. If you're going in, we're going with you."

Dave studied the lanky settler's logic and found it good. In the heat of his own personal anger at Curly, he'd neglected to figure all the angles to this affair.

"Reckon I'm being too hasty," he admitted. "Bracing Curly now wouldn't settle any part of this. I'll wait and see how the election comes out."

THEY COUNTED the ballots at sundown. Dave edged out Hoke Yancey by a narrow margin. He found himself being congratulated upon all sides. It was a funny feeling. A town councilman unconsciously put their attitude into words.

"Excusin' my bluntness, son," he murmured, pinning the shiny star on Dave's shirt pocket, "but any stranger would say this town had gone loco. Appointin' you to fill Blaine's unexpired term and electin' you to a full term after that. Many a man that ought to know, says Curly Gray ain't one-half as mean as you can be when you get started. I hope you treat this badge right."

Dave stared coldly at the circle of business men crowded into the sheriff's office in the courthouse. These were the solid citizens, the decent folk who frowned on him and his kind, yet put him into office to serve their own selfish ends.

"I've got my own ideas about wearing a badge," he said so all could hear. "I'll tolerate no interference. If that doesn't suit you, you'd better call it off right now."

"No, no," the pudgy councilman said hastily. "It's no news to any of us that Ben Blaine wanted to turn the job over to you for a long time. If Ben swears by you, so do we. We need a hard man to bring peace to the valley. We couldn't have made a better choice."

"Thanks." Dave's voice was sarcastic. "I'll try to justify your faith in me. If I don't stop a bullet, I'll clean up this mess—my way!" He settled in the rickety swivel chair behind a paper-littered, flat-topped desk. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll get down to work. Ralph Ledbetter's in the courthouse somewhere. If anybody sees him, I'd appreciate your sending him here."

They straggled out into the corridor. Ledbetter soon made his appearance. Dave motioned him to a seat.

"In a few minutes," he said, "I'm walking into the Paradise and arresting Curly. I can't let him get away with Ben's shooting. The pool would try it again. I'm going to teach them to respect the law. How many armed men you got in town tonight?"

"Enough to meet the pool on even terms." In the yellow lamplight, the settler's angular face showed grim as carved stone. "Is this the showdown?"

"I don't know and I don't care!" As in the past, Dave felt black, turbulent tides loosed within him at the prospect of trouble. "I've fought in range wars, mister. Several of them. I know how fast they can start. If we play it right, maybe we can stop this one tonight."

Ledbetter eyed Dave oddly. He listened to the new sheriff's plan and nodded his head in agreement. A few minutes later, he slipped out of the room.

Dave turned out the light, slumped back in the swivel chair and stared into the darkness. I've done it, he thought morosely. I've thrown away everything. These people think Curly's a mighty bad hombre. What will they think of me? I fought it. I had it licked. I'll never be able to do it again. I'm crazy to let them pull me into this mess. I ought to go straight to the shop and saddle my horse and light a shuck out of here. Only I won't—because it won't let me.

The courthouse occupied most of the square at the upper end of Main. The county jail squatted directly across the street. Picking up the ring of keys from his desk, Dave locked his office. The jail boasted no jailer. Through local custom, Hoke Yancey, town marshal, conducted his affairs from the tiny office in the front part of the adobe building. Dave had not expected to find Yancey at his desk, nor was he disappointed.

He looked in the cell block and found it empty. He examined the racked arsenal on the wall. He found a pair of handcuffs on the desk top and slipped them into his hip pocket. Once more he examined his gun and tested its hang in the oiled holster. Satisfied, he turned down the lamp-wick, locked the door and strode down Main.

He came opposite Doc West's office. Yellow lamplight spilled through the front window.

An oblong shaft of light caught him as the office door opened, winked out as it closed. Then Nan was there before him, barring his way.

She said, "Don't do it, Dave. You'll be killed. Curly isn't worth it."

"Do what?" he asked testily.

"Arrest Curly. You needn't pretend. Everybody knows what your first move as sheriff will be. The whole town is watching. The pool is waiting for you. They've made their brags. They're out to get you, Dave."

He said, "You'd rather I show yellow? That I treat Ben's star like that? The news would kill him." Her face was a pale blur in the shadowy street light. He bent closer so that he might see it. "Does Curly still mean that much to you?"

"No! I'm over that now." Her voice sounded strangled; he could barely hear her words. "I've been over it a long time—only I didn't know until today. It's—it's like awakening from a horrible dream."

"And Curly had to shoot up Ben to open your eyes," Dave snapped harshly, not caring if he hurt her. The old black tides pulsed inside him with increasing force. This talk only made him impatient to get on with his job.

"No!" she cried. "Listen, Dave. Curly came to the house to see me early this morning. I was alone. He'd been drinking. He wasn't the man I once knew. He—he's changed terribly. He wanted to take me away—leave this country. I refused. We quarreled. It was awful. Curly went off terribly angry. He signed on with the pool. You know the rest of it. . . ."

Suddenly she was in his arms. He held her close, letting her sob against his chest. For the first time since they'd been married, she fully shed the reserve in which she'd always cloaked herself. It gave him a taste of what their marriage could have been and he was thankful for it.

Dave said, "Curly always was a devil with the women. You're not the first one, Nan. But it's taken you longer to get over it. I'm glad you told me." He pushed her away from him. "I've got to go now. I'm late. If I come back, we'll talk things over. Maybe we can straighten it all out."

"I can't stop you," she said dully. "I knew I couldn't but I had to try. God help you, Dave! There's nothing to straighten out. I'll be praying that you come back to me, Dave."

He didn't kiss her. He didn't dare to. He strode on down the street toward the Paradise, carrying the picture of her lovely, stricken face with him.

THE PARADISE sported one of the few false fronts along Main. As Dave approached the saloon, he saw a man climb off

a bench under the overhang and scuttle inside. A pool lookout.

Dave paused in front of the place. The sound of drunken revelry blared through the open door and windows. For an outfit that had just lost an election, the pool was doing all right.

Ralph Ledbetter's lanky figure materialized from the gloom of an empty doorway, drifted past Dave. "Everything's set," he muttered in a low voice. He continued his aimless stroll along the street.

Dave sensed movement all around him. The shadows must be alive with armed settlers and hired guns but he could not see them. It was an eerie feeling.

He shrugged it off, pushed his way through the batwing doors.

The long bar across the rear wall was packed with men. The gaming table to his left was crowded. The poker tables on his right hummed with the clatter of chips, the hubbub of low tense voices. A gray haze of tobacco smoke clouded the huge room. The smell of strong whiskey and leather and sweat pressed against him, arousing old and slumbering memories.

His entrance brought a sudden cessation of all activity in the saloon. Every man there deliberately turned to stare at him. If the pool figured on scaring him, they soon realized their mistake. His cold black eyes measured the room with contemptuous indifference. Most of the pool riders broke under that stare and turned uneasily back to their games and drinks. But the death-like silence held.

The pool men covertly eyed the two famous Gray brothers, wondering what would happen now that they rode opposite sides of the fence.

In the past, people had always taken them to be twins. Nobody would make that mistake now, Dave thought, as he spotted Curly at the bar. Curly's elbows were propped on the mahogany behind him. He held a half-empty glass in one hand. A curious, speculative gleam danced in his bloodshot eyes.

"Howdy, lawdog," he said thickly, a semblance of a smile breaking over his bloated face. "I've been waiting for you to drop by and welcome me back to town."

They had never met like this before. Dave felt a sudden sickness at what he must do, then felt the sickness swallowed up by the turgid anger inside him. Curly had long since forfeited all rights to brotherly consideration. The ties that once bound them together had vanished.

"Jail," said Dave, moving forward, "is your welcome. Why did you come back, Curly? You knew what would happen."

Curly laughed hollowly. "Don't crowd me, Dave. You saw what happened to old Blaine. Don't make me pull on you too."

Dave kept closing the distance between them. "Answer me," he said. "Why did you come back?"

"You know." Curly's voice mocked him. "I can see it. Nan told you. She's mine, Dave. I had first claim on her. That's why I came back. She's in love with me."

Every man in the crowded room heard him. Dave came to a sudden halt, unable to believe his ears. The old Curly would never have slandered any woman, either in private or public. This Curly had just given evidence of the mental degradation that claimed him, by breaking one of the inviolable rules of this country—not to sully the name of a good woman in public.

"You're lying, Curly! You're going to eat those words." Dave felt like a tight-wound spring whose sudden release was long overdue. The temper inside him had become a giant, and that giant cried out for action. Again Dave moved toward his brother.

Curly raised his glass, downed the raw whiskey at one gulp. His hand came down, smashing the empty glass upon the floor. His other hand streaked for one of the notched gunbutts at his lean hips.

He never got the gun out of leather.

Dave's solid weight smashed into him, pinning him against the bar with a jarring force that rattled the glassware all along the mahogany. Dave's long muscular arms encircled his brother's body and arms. He braced himself on wide-spread legs. His shirt ripped open under the pressure of swelling muscles as he heaved. Curly sprawled his full length on the dirty floor, rolled over twice before he regained his balance.

He got to one elbow, stared blankly up at Dave who stood over him. The pool men eyed the pair unbelievably. Both of these brothers bore enviable reputations, yet the pool had figured they had the tougher of the two on their side. Now, looking at the big, hard-eyed man with the star on his shirt, they weren't so sure.

"Forget the guns!" snapped Dave. "Don't make me shoot you."

Amazement flooded Curly's eyes, as if he'd just discovered that he was on the floor. "Fists, eh!" he drawled, getting to his feet. "Bueno, if that's the way you want it."

The fight that the pool men saw that night was a topic of conversation for years to come. Those two six-foot-plus giants slugged it out. Face to face and arms' length apart, they stood on braced legs, giving and taking vicious jolting blows that would have torn an ordinary man apart.

DAVE HAD never met a man who could take the punishment in his fists. He had never had a fight with his brother until now.

Curly, he found, was that same rare combination as himself—a combination of whang-leather sinews, limitless strength, and the Devil. But Curly lacked one thing—the black ravening temper that always possessed Dave at moments like this, robbing his brain of all reason, filling him with the demoniac impulse to murder and destroy.

This was the thing that he had conquered in the past three years, the thing that was loosed at flood tide inside him now. It gave him the extra strength, the finer timing, the merciless savagery that sent Curly down upon one knee, swaying like a stricken oak.

Curly tried to get up, couldn't make it. He sat down heavily, a wondering look in his pain glazed eyes. Blood trickled from both corners of his mouth. He'd lost his hat and his curly black hair hung down over his swelling eyes. His labored breathing made a rasping sound in the tomb-like silence of the saloon. Mechanically, he raised a grimy hand and tenderly felt of his bruised and bleeding face.

Dave said, "Tell them you lied. About Nan. Tell them!"

The beating had sobered Curly. "Sure I lied," he mumbled. "I came back for her but she wouldn't have none of me. She kicked me out of the house. I—"

He tugged at a sixgun. It was jammed in the holster. He tried for his other gun just as Dave's boot caught him behind the ear. He slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Dave knew he'd been roughed up plenty himself. His lips were smashed, he tasted blood in his mouth. Every movement of his throbbing body drew twinges of pain from battered flesh. He wiped a tattered shirt sleeve across his sweaty face, put his back to the bar and faced the circle of silent, shocked men, hemming him in.

"He goes to jail," Dave said softly. "After this, anybody comes to town, he checks his guns at my office. There'll be no more reckless shooting. Does anyone want to argue the matter?"

The words touched each of them, yet the new sheriff made it a personal issue by staring directly at Max Arnold and his two partners, Pike Storey and Jake Miessner. They still sat at the glass-strewn table from which they had seen the fight.

Arnold, a squat, denim-clad man, scowled darkly, leaned over to whisper something into the ear of the fourth man at the table, Hoke Yancey. Yancey nodded drunkenly, took another gulp of whiskey from his full glass, and pushed his chair back. He swayed to his feet, a tall, cadaverous man dressed in black. Hands on gunbutts, he crossed the open floor with the careful dignity of a man who knows he has had too much to drink.

"Gray," he sneered, "the county's yours to

run. The town is mine. I'm still marshal. Nobody ever needed to check their guns before this. And they don't have to now on your say-so. You want to make something of it?"

The fury inside Dave flared up anew. He took a long stride forward. His bunched fingers came up from his boot tops and exploded in Yancey's face. The marshal hit the floor on his back, bounced, came up to a sitting position. He got to his feet, his gun drawn and leveling at the big sheriff.

The swirling mists stirred to a new frenzy in Dave's brain. He'd tried to avoid gunplay. Now it was Yancey or himself. He didn't remember drawing his .45 but it was there, thundering and bucking in his hand. Tongues of flame lashed from the long muzzle, his slugs smashing Yancey back onto the floor. The marshal's bullets tore harmlessly into the ceiling. Then the heavy weapon slipped out of his lifeless hands.

"That was reckless shooting!" Dave snapped. "Anybody else want to commit suicide tonight?"

Max Arnold nodded his bulldog head imperceptibly. The pool men saw the command, began to close in. Hands slid down to gunbutts. Purpose glinted flint-hard on that circle of grim faces.

Where in hell was Ralph Ledbetter, Dave wondered desperately. The settler and his allies were supposed to barge in here at this moment. That was the way Dave had planned this thing; it was the only chance he had to succeed.

"Hold it, pool! We've got you covered!" Ledbetter's voice sounded in crisp command. Dave drew a long, deep breath, feeling the relief of the moment seep through him. The man was solid, dependable, and for that he was thankful.

Dave saw indecision warp the circle of faces. Stooping, he scooped up Curly's limp figure and lifted it over his shoulder. He faced them, gun in hand.

"I'm coming through. Curly goes to jail. If I don't get you from the front, somebody will from behind. Out of my way, now."

They scattered before him, uncertainty marking their faces and their movements. He was halfway to the front door when Max Arnold's rasping voice fused them into a solid, menacing enemy.

"Don't let him through, boys! This is a showdown! Blast Gray down! Get every nester you can!"

It turned into a nightmare of smoking, spitting guns and milling, shadowy men. Dave aimed his lead at the ornate lamps over the bar, watched the lights snuff out as if a giant hand had suddenly doused them. At the front door and windows, and from the storeroom in the rear, the settler marksmen picked out

the remaining lamps, leaving the Paradise in deep gloom.

Dave felt the burning lacework of bullets about him. Somehow he made it through the batwings without feeling the bite of a slug, still carrying Curly's limp body over his shoulder. Out there in the street, he intended taking over command of the besiegers. A look at his brother in the flickering light of a nearby streetlight changed his mind.

Curly had taken a bullet in the chest. Crim-son bubbled and spread upon his shirt-front. Dave knew he had to get him to a doctor at once.

Chapter III

RANGE HOG'S HOSTAGE

THE LANKY Ledbetter slid into the shadowy doorway beside Dave. "We can't hold them long," he said. "My men don't have the heart for this sort of thing. Our hired guns can't carry the fight to the pool. There aren't enough of them. You'd better get out there and stop it."

Realization of what he had done had swept the temper out of Dave's brain. The grief that replaced it was a cold hard lump in his chest.

"To hell with the lot of you!" he bit out savagely. "Curly's hurt—maybe dying. I'm taking him to Doc West. Then I'll come back. I'll talk to the pool—if you can hold them that long."

"But you promised!" Ledbetter's hand twisted in the tattered front of Dave's shirt. "You promised to stop it once we got you out of there! Remember? My men aren't gun-fighters—they'll be killed! You'll have their blood on your hands, Gray. This was your idea!"

Dave struck the clinging hand away. "Getting Curly shot up wasn't part of it," he said thickly, torn between his duty to the settlers and his blood obligation to his brother. Yet already he was placing Curly in the doorway. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

He never got the chance. The rattle of gunfire inside the Paradise flared to new heights. That of the besiegers weakened, choked off as fright laid a clammy hand over the settlers. The pool had found a weak spot in the ambushade. It was all they needed. Whooping madly, shooting at anything that moved in their path, the pool men poured out into the street.

"Too late now," Dave muttered, pulling Ledbetter back into the shelter of the door. "Your men are scattering. There's nothing we can do."

They hugged the shadows, watching pool men swing up into leather and send boogered horseflesh thundering wildly along the street,

Guns crashed, store windows shattered, exultant yells reverberated up and down the silent streets. Several times, pool men sent their mounts the length of Main, defying the town to stop them. Finally they rode out of town.

Gently, Dave picked up Curly's limp form. "You go count noses," he told Ledbetter. "I'll be at the doc's office. We'll talk this thing over there."

Doc West's office looked like a cyclone had struck it. Lamplight poured through the open front door as Dave stepped upon the little porch, carrying his burden. He swept the scene with burning eyes. The carpet was rumpled, the couch sat awry. The medico lay sprawled before the closed bedroom door. There was no sign of Nan.

Placing Curly on the couch, Dave stooped over the unconscious doctor. A purplish bump marred his balding head where someone had laid a gun barrel against his skull. A few dippers of water from the bucket hanging in the corner brought him out of his coma, gasping and sputtering.

Recognition flared in his eyes at sight of Dave. "I—I tried to stop them," he said weakly. "Miss Nan was sitting up with Ben. I feared for his safety. They didn't touch him. They laid hands on the girl. Both of us fought. They drug her into this room. I followed, trying to stop them. Then all went black." He stared wide-eyed at Dave's harsh face, seeing the hell that glowed in those black eyes. "You did—didn't get here in time?"

"By they," said Dave, "I take it you mean the pool? No, they were gone when I got here. So's Nan. They'll wish they'd never touched her, Doc. You recognize any of them?"

"Yes. Max Arnold directed them. He didn't enter into it. The others were his men. I've seen them around but I don't know their names."

Dave said, "The others don't count. Only Arnold."

He helped West to his feet, pointed toward the couch. "My brother took a bullet. He's bleeding bad, Doc. See what you can do."

They stripped Curly down to the waist. The slug had entered his back, passed through him at an angle, leaving an ugly hole in his left breast when it emerged. After his examination, the little medico slowly shook his head.

"Punctured lung," he muttered. "Bullet may have scraped his heart. He won't see sunrise tomorrow. I'm sorry, Dave." He opened a medical chest, began pulling out instruments and bandages. "I'll make him as comfortable as I can. He might rally enough to talk before the end."

Curly did. Dave was out on the front porch, talking to Ralph Ledbetter and a group of settlers, when West came to the door and summoned him. He hurried inside.

Pain and knowledge of approaching death had erased much of the hardness from Curly's face. A faint smile rimmed his bloodless lips as Dave's hand closed over his own limp fingers.

"I got it, Dave," he whispered weakly. "That bullet was overdue. Funny, I always was scared of dying. This ain't bad at all. It's like the end of a long nightmare. I never was cut out to be no badman anyway." Then wistfully, "You licked it, Dave. I had the same chance. If only I'd stayed here with you. . . ."

"Things would be different." Dave blinked away the moisture that filled his eyes, suddenly finding it easy to forgive his brother many things that he had condemned him for these past three years. "You'd have Nan. She loved you. She turned to me, trying to forget you."

"Nan!" It was as if some forgotten chapter of Curly's recent life had abruptly opened for him. Fear grew in his eyes. He struggled to sit up, didn't have the strength. "I'm in the doc's office, ain't I? Nan's here, too. Tell me, Dave! They didn't get her, did they?"

"Arnold did. She's gone, Curly. What's behind it? Do you know?"

Bitter memory blanketed Curly's pale face. "I ought to," he whispered hollowly. "It was my idea. I wanted her—and I didn't care how. Max Arnold liked the idea, too. He figured on gunning you down when you came looking for her. He's your man, Dave. Miessner and Storey don't count. They've got families and they're for leaving the nesters alone. Stop Arnold, and you've stopped the pool."

"I'll be looking him up," murmured Dave. "Where did he take her?"

"To pool headquarters. Don't let him keep her there, Dave. It isn't safe. Promise me you won't let him keep her. . . ."

Curly never got an answer. His head rolled limply to one side. Dave pulled a blanket over the stiff form. Turning, he strode out the door and onto the porch.

A LOT of townsmen had joined the settlers now, among them the councilmen who had pinned the badge on Dave earlier in the evening. Their pudgy spokesman, Cassidy the banker, pressed forward, spattering,

"Everybody's laughing, Gray. The pool has made you look silly. You had them penned up like sheep and you let them get away. There's talk that Arnold rode out of town, taking your wife with him. Maybe we picked the wrong man. Maybe—"

Dave put the flat of his hand against the man's white shirt-front and shoved. Cassidy squalled his fear as he tumbled off the low porch and sprawled on the ground, the breath knocked out of him.

"I told you I'd clean up this mess," Dave said impersonally, including them all in his

cold eyed stare. "My way! First, I had to give the pool enough rope to hang itself. It did. I can slap almost every charge in the books at Max Arnold. I've got to track him down first. I don't think his saddlehands will be idle. Ledbetter, what would you do if you were in Arnold's shoes tonight? If you wanted to rid yourself of a bunch of troublesome nesters?"

The lanky settler said, "I'd burn them out. Just to make sure of the job, I might even dynamite their dam."

"Exactly," answered Dave. "I'll lay odds that the pool is on its way to your farms right now. You got any guards posted back there?"

Ledbetter muttered, "None. Our only hope lay in swinging the election. We brought in every man."

"Then hit leather," warned Dave. "Leave your women and children here in town. They'll be cared for. Get back to your farms as fast as you can. Send a party up to watch your dam. And God help you if you don't show more guts than you did tonight."

An excited, uneasy murmur stirred over the settlers. They began breaking up, heading for buggies and wagons and saddle horses even before Ledbetter's cry rolled over them.

"Get for home, boys! The sheriff thinks we're yellow! Here's your chance to show him some guts he hasn't seen! The guts that this country doesn't think we got!"

And in a lower voice to Dave, "By your standards, they're not fighters. But they'll fight for their homes. Down to the last shell and the last man. You'll see."

"They'll get their test," said Dave. "I'm riding the other way—to pool headquarters. I may be able to pull them off of you. I'll do my best."

"How?"

Dave didn't answer the settler's question. He stepped off the porch and lost himself in the spreading throng that covered the street.

Dave had never been one to punish a horse. But this night he pushed his big black gelding to the limit, feeling the bitter grief inside him run out with the miles. The black was heaving, its ebony hide covered with foam and sweat, when the myriad buildings that comprised pool headquarters loomed in the western sky. The time, he judged, was close to midnight.

Past visits had left him with an accurate knowledge of the pool layout. Each pool co-owner lived in a huge white house on the lip of the shallow basin that held most of the ranch utility buildings. Those three residences blazed with lights now; the rambling bunk-house below them was dark.

To Dave, that fact was significant. It proved that the pool saddlehands had not turned in for the night. If they were prowling

the valley, there was only one logical reason for them to be doing so. They were raiding the settler farms as he'd guessed they would.

He ground-reined the winded black in the gloom of the big barn in the center of the basin. Sliding out of saddle, he loosened the cinches and wiped the horse down with an old gunnysack he found on a corral fence. As far as he could tell, the pool was unguarded.

He spotted a lantern inside the barn, put a match to the wick and continued his investigation. The place smelled of hay and harness and horses. Half a dozen big draft mules were tethered in stalls. Untying the rope halters, Dave led the animals outside and freed them. He took care that the corrals about the barn were empty of livestock before going back into the building.

Taking a can of kerosene from the harness room, he circled the barn, dousing a generous quantity of the fuel on the warped, tinder-dry wall boards. His second trip around left a trail of burned matches and a series of growing, licking flames.

"She's going to be some bonfire," he muttered, hurrying outside and taking the black's reins. "The loft's full of dry hay. Those pool hands are bound to see it. If it don't pull them off the nesters, I reckon nothing will."

Fingers of flame had crept through the barn walls and were creeping upward when Dave paused at the worn hitchrack at the foot of the slope leading up to Max Arnold's white house. Knotting the reins about the rail, he glided uphill, making it noiseless and fast, knowing that the fire would be noticed any moment now.

Up on the rim he vaulted the low rail fence and crossed the ill-kept yard. Nan's shrill cry of terror sent him upon the gloomy porch with reckless drive. And for the second time this night, that black, unreasoning wrath possessed his brain.

HE SENSED danger as his hand tried the door knob and found it locked. Boots scraped on dry wood as he whirled, hands dipping to his gunbutts. Shadowy figures materialized on either side of him. Starlight glinted on metal as a voice rasped,

"You're covered, mister! Don't make us shoot. Just hold it right there till we get a look at you."

Nan's scream came again from somewhere inside the house. Dave tensed as one of his two captors chuckled coarsely, said, "The boss is entertainin'. You wouldn't be Dave Gray, would you? Max was mighty anxious that you didn't barge in on his party." A match flared in Dave's face. He didn't recognize the two men who held their guns on him. "Yeah, you're Gray. Max wants to see you—later."

To hell with you, Dave thought grimly. Nan's in there and God knows what's happen-

ing to her. I'm busting in and no two-bit gunnies will stop me.

The two guards seemed undecided about what to do with him. "I'll lift his guns," one of them muttered, moving forward. "We'll tie him up and hold him here."

"Look!" the other man bit out. "The barn! She's burnin'!"

"What!" said the man closing in on Dave. Turning his head for a quick glance was an involuntary gesture.

Dave's steel-thewed fingers wrapped around the man's gun-hand and weapon. He swung his brawny arm skyward, pointing the gun muzzle up. Like a puppet on a string, the pool guard was jerked in close against Dave's chest. He was whirled about like a baby, sent reeling into his comrade. The unfired gun fell out of his paralyzed fingers as he collided. The two men fell in a struggling, cursing heap.

Dave sprinted off the porch, headed for the rear entrance. Nan needed him. He had to get in the house. The thought drummed in his mind as he tried the back door. It was locked.

He backed away, came at the stout panel, putting all his weight behind his shoulder. It splintered, almost gave. He backed away and tried it again. The two guards rounded the corner of the house as he drove forward. He heard the report of a sixgun, felt a bullet zip past his head. The door shuddered, sagged inward this time.

Dave leaped over it, found himself in a kitchen. A Chinese cook cowered behind a big, wood-burning cookstove, jabbering in pidgin English. Ignoring him, Dave slid toward the front part of the house. Lamps glowed in the front rooms, but they were vacant. He came to a stop, pondering his next move. Nan's cry came from somewhere up in the second floor, choked off as if a hand had suddenly encircled her throat.

No lights shone through the gloom at the top of the stairs. Dave took the steps in great strides, feeling the scream of searching bullets. Arnold's two gun guards had entered the house and sighted him. He fought down the urge to draw his guns and return their fire. Too much time had been wasted already. It might be too late to save Nan. But he had to find her at once.

Up on the second level, he heard the sounds of a struggle—overturning furniture, the scrape of moving feet. The hallway was dark but light shafted out from under a door. Dave took three strides, found the door knob, jerked on it. The door swung open.

The room was a shambles. Chairs were overturned, the desk pulled away from the wall. Only the wall lamp seemed untouched. The two struggling figures turned at Dave's entrance, broke apart.

Nan—and Max Arnold. Nan's face was

contorted with fear. Arnold's bulldog face twisted in drunken fury as he turned on Dave. His hand scooped a sixgun out of leather, came up leveling it. A tongue of flame leaped from the muzzle.

Drawing his gun and triggering it were unconscious moves on Dave's part. He felt lead burn across his ribs. He saw Arnold stiffen and clutch at the black hole that appeared over his heart.

Slugs hammered at Dave from the doorway behind him. He spun around, caught one of the pool gunswifts in his sights. The man went down, but not before his lead hammered Dave to his knees.

It all became a vague nightmare. The other gunny was inside the room, throwing lead. Nan was there beside Dave, pulling a gun out of his limp fingers. He remembered seeing orange flame spurt from the gun in her hands. Then all went blank. . . .

He came out of the coma to find Nan bending over him. He knew he hadn't been unconscious long. The mingled reek of black gunpowder and fresh blood stung his nostrils. Pain hammered at his head. He raised an unsteady hand and felt the bandage over his right temple.

"It was close, Dave," she said softly. "Another inch—and you wouldn't be alive."

They were still in Arnold's office, Dave saw. She had turned out the lamp but a flickering red light poured through the windows, illuminating the room with an eerie brightness. Max Arnold still lay on the floor beside the desk. The two gun guards were motionless heaps before the door.

"I got Arnold—and another gent," said Dave. "What happened to the other one?"

Nan said, "He would have shot you. I thought he did. I—I went crazy for a moment. I killed him with your gun."

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "The fire will bring the pool back here, pronto. I hope it isn't already too late."

STRENGTH was seeping back into Dave's muscles. Taking Nan's hand in his own, he led her downstairs. Unbarring the front door, they paused on the porch. In the distance, the blazing barn lay engulfed with flames. Every inch of the basin floor was clearly visible. Sparks had ignited some of the small buildings about the doomed stable. The pole corrals were beginning to smoulder.

"We'll never make it," said Dave, watching the dark patch of horsemen pour down the opposite slope far across the basin. "Quick, Nan. Over to the Miessner place. I see womenfolk on the porch. You'll be safe there."

Turning, he strode down the slope, shutting his ears to Nan's low cry. There was nothing

left but bluff. He wondered if one lone man could bluff the pool—standing in the heat of the barn he had destroyed. He doubted it. Not after the events of this day and night.

Pool saddlehands lit down out of leather and ran for water. They formed a bucket brigade between the windmill tank and the flames. Some of them took wet gunnysacks and beat out the smouldering fire that was spreading to corrals and nearby buildings. Dave climbed up on a corral fence and calmly watched their efforts. He rolled and smoked several cigarettes before they had things under control.

Miessner and Storey came toward him then. Both were lean, lanky men, their denim clothes charred and dirty, their sweaty faces streaked with soot. Dave slid off the fence to face them.

"Arnold's dead," he said. "I had to kill him. Tell me, misters, why did you ride off tonight, leaving my wife alone with him?"

They stared blankly at him. "Alone!" echoed Storey. "We didn't know, Gray. Grabbing her in town was Arnold's idea. It was none of ours. We busted up over it on the way home. Jake and me's wanted to buy Max out for a long time. We didn't like this nester deal from the start. There's room for everybody in the valley. We laid it on the line to Max in his house tonight. He didn't like it none but there was nothin' he could do. When the excitement died down, we learned he'd sent most of our hands to burn the nesters out. We fogged out after them, aiming to stop it. We didn't make it. Our boys had got to three-four nester shacks. Then we saw flames comin' from over here. We rounded up all hands and headed back pronto. You know the rest."

"Except one thing." The rage stirred restlessly inside Dave again. "You knew my wife was helpless in Arnold's hands. How come you to ride off before you knew she was safe with your own womenfolk?"

New sweat rolled off Jake Miessner's rugged face. "We clean forgot about her," he admitted. "Go ahead and shoot us, Gray. If you figger that'll even things. I ain't goin' to match guns with you."

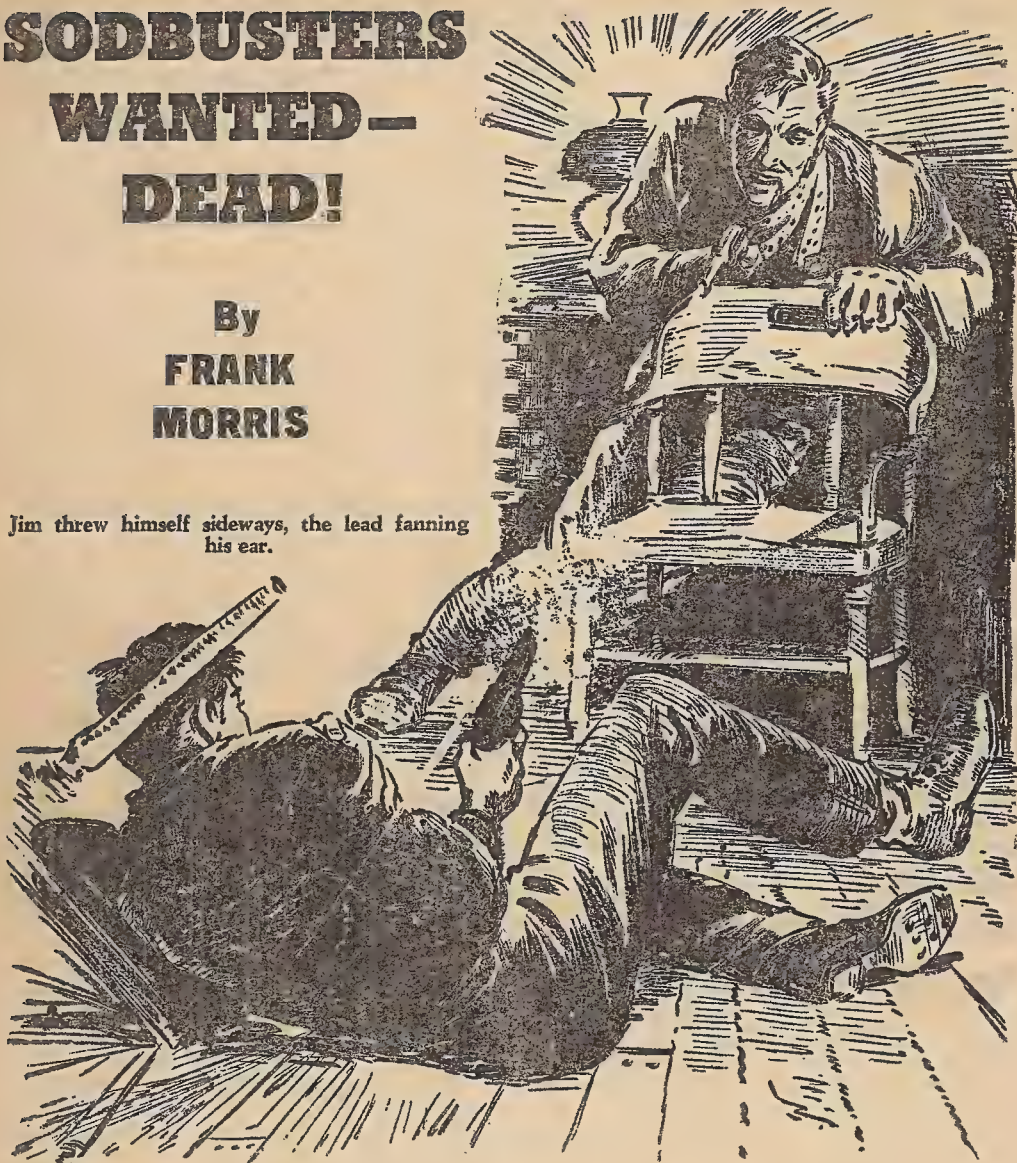
Their honesty was apparent. "Forget it," said Dave, feeling a new calmness sweep the dark tides aside. "The valley's had enough trouble. Maybe tonight has settled it. You want peace. That's all Ledbetter and his friends have ever wanted. Be in town tomorrow. The settlers will be there too. We'll patch things up."

Dave wheeled, took long hurried strides up the slope, feeling the strange peace within himself. Nan waited for him up there. She loved him. She'd said so. They understood each other now. They'd both share the new contentment that was coming to the valley.

SODBUSTERS WANTED— DEAD!

By
**FRANK
MORRIS**

Jim threw himself sideways, the lead fanning his ear.



The silent company of Boothill ghosts prepared to welcome Jim Bradley when that gun-shy fighting man hit the trail to a sodbuster's showdown. For they knew that a pair of iron-hard fists and a warrior's heart make a mighty sorry showing when stacked against snarling .45 slugs!

BRADLEY saw them coming as he made for the house with the evening's milk. A cold dread touched his gaunt, six-foot frame, and he hurried to place the foaming bucket beside the door of the little tarpapered shanty. He turned then, put his long back against the wall and smiled reassuringly at his wife's white face peering from the kitchen window.

Jim Bradley watched the two men ride into the yard and halt, and his gray eyes widened in surprise. It was Ross Dahl on that long-legged bay. Jim's big, work-worn hands were clenched by his sides, and his lips became a

thin gash under his nose. What was that sharp-faced land locator doing with a Cross rider?

Jim Bradley wasn't afraid—not for himself. A man bucking the uncertainties of homestead life on the raw edge of the Montana cow country had to expect trouble. But May and little Jimmy looked to him for protection. He was their buffer against want, against the coming lonely winter, against the hungry Assiniboine Sioux who at times swept down like locusts on their meager supplies. Jim was a strong right arm against the grim vicissitudes of frontier life.

He was mighty little protection, though, he thought bitterly, in front of big tough Scotty MacLean's Cross-in-a-Circle outfit. An old .45-70 single-shot rifle wasn't going to scare off those gun-toting waddies.

DAHL SLUMPED in his saddle, threw a long leg over the horn and leaned forward. He grinned with his thin lips, winked briefly at his companion. He was a tall man, topping Jim by a good three inches. Well dressed in long gray, swallow-tail coat and tight fitting trousers, he had the air of a gambler about him—a city man. He pushed back the soft felt hat and put his hard green eyes on the homesteader.

"You still here, Bradley?" he greeted Jim. It was a question, but there was no trace of surprise in the angular features. It was more as though he had expected to find the homesteader on his flax farm, and was prepared for trouble.

"Yes," Jim said shortly, and watched the cowman gig his roan up beside the locator. This rider looked gunman to Jim. He shrugged. All of Scotty MacLean's men looked tough.

"Meet up with Lambert—Ord Lambert," Dahl introduced, and the smirking smile on his lips broadened gloatingly. "Ord's a new Cross rider. Goin' to put in the winter up at Scotty's line camp north of your tree claim—between old man Thompson's place and yours. He aims to see that you an' Thompson pull down them west line fences so's Scotty's cows can drift through the pass to the shelter along Redstone Creek this winter."

Jim's gray eyes puckered in his weathered face, and he put his wide shoulders up against the door. This was Scotty's threatened move. The cowman was going to crowd the settlers off the range. Jim had been expecting some such action, but had put it off, tried to reason out the folly of the thing. With all the big cowman's bluster and anger at the homesteaders for their hemming in of his sprawling range, Jim had hoped the man would not resort to violence. But here it was, right at his front door.

A surge of anger colored Jim's flat cheeks. He was a lean man, with wide-spaced eyes that

now held a cold, hard gleam. He was big-boned, with a farmer's slow, lumbering looseness, and the summer sun had burned its layers of tan smoothly over his face and neck. All his features were rugged, sharply chiseled.

"I'll not pull down my fences for MacLean's critters," he said hotly. "I told you that, Dahl, when I was in Willow Grove last week. I don't know what business it is of yours, but if you're frontin' for that range hog, you can tell him right now. I stay!"

Ord Lambert put a hand on his sixgun and cleared his throat.

"Better ear up, farmer," he rasped. "We ain't here to listen to your mad. We're tellin' you what to do."

Jim stared hot-eyed at the slender gunman. Lambert's face was partly hidden behind a two weeks growth of black stubble and his big, sweat-stained Stetson was pulled low over his pale unblinking eyes. He thrust his chin out belligerently, standing up stiff in the oxbows so that his holster swung free on his slim hip.

"I didn't think you'd pull 'em down," Ross Dahl said thinly, and ceased to smile. The arrogance that lurked in the lines around his mouth and in his eyes suddenly rode the tone of his voice. "That's why I'm payin' you a visit."

"Yeah?" Jim asked.

"Yeah," Dahl said and nodded his black head. "Either pull down them fences an' let MacLean's cows through—or git. You show fight, an' Scotty's red-head temper'll bust you clean to hell. That'll mean range war, an' you'll be blamed by the other settlers for bein' too stiff-necked an' selfish. You'll be the cause of it." Dahl glanced at the shack, saw the door open slowly and pretty golden-haired May Bradley step into view. Dahl looked back at Jim meaningly. "I'd hate to see bloodshed," he added.

"Better go back in the house," Jim said to his wife. "This—"

"All right, sodbuster!" Ord Lambert broke in roughly. He regarded Jim with hard eyes that held a bright glitter, and he flashed a quick glance at May. "We told you, an' you had your say." He reined his roan to Jim's side, crowded him up against the wall. May ducked back inside the house and closed the door. "But—if you hanker for trouble, you'll git it. Savvy?" Ord added insolently.

"I'll get a buyer, mebbe, for your place," Ross Dahl put in. "Could be Scotty'll buy it."

Jim grabbed the cheek-strap of the gunman's roan, jerked it. When the horse reared back, he ducked under and stepped to Dahl's gray, turning his back on the gun-hung stranger.

"Listen, Dahl," he snapped, "I've heard of your dirty methods. I know why you're sidin' MacLean—so's you can chouse me off my place, grab the vacated homestead for a dollar

an acre. Then you'll sell to MacLean. Well, if that cowman pays you, I'll have you both up in Federal court. That crooked stuff don't go. Now you take this killer an' clear off my place. Pronto!"

Suddenly there was a tinkle of broken glass. Ord Lambert turned in his saddle, his .45 half drawn as May Bradley poked Jim's old Army rifle through the window and blasted the hat from the gunman's head. May's voice, shrill with anger and fear, rang on the still evening air.

"You get out of here," she cried. "Right now—both of you."

Rage flashed in Ross Dahl's green eyes. He spun around.

"Come on, Ord," he snarled. "We've done all we can. We've warned him."

The two of them wheeled from the yard and vanished in the dusk.

THERE WAS a cold sweat on Jim's brow as he stalked in to his wife.

"May!" he jerked out, and then he was holding her slight form in his arms, and dabbing at the tears that ran down her smooth cheeks. "Don't take it so hard, girl," he said tenderly. "They can't chase us off our place. I'll see MacLean an' tell him what I think, you can bet."

"Oh, Jim—Jim," May sobbed, "they'll kill you. They'll drive us away from here."

"I may be a sodbuster, like that gunman said," Jim shook his head, "but I ain't a dummy. Give me that rifle. There's no crooked landshark, or high-an'-mighty cowman, going to pull that sort of thing."

May shoved away from him, stared strangely at him a moment.

"It isn't MacLean," she said quickly.

"Not MacLean? What d'you mean?" Jim's voice held surprise.

"No, Jim. I'll admit Scotty MacLean is a rough man, greedy and all that. But he's not the kind of a man that'd push a family off their farm—in the Fall, before a Montana winter."

"He thinks he owns this land," Jim argued hotly.

"No."

"How'd you know?"

"He's big and he blusters, Jim," May said, "but at heart, I believe he's kind. That bluster is mostly a mask. I'm sure we can live here—even possibly become friends some day."

Jim scoffed at that, and tramped into the house for his box of cartridges. The heavy sound of his walking awakened his little two-year old son, and the baby cried out to him, gurgling and laughing. But Jim Bradley was too angry to stop and play with the kid as he always had done. He jammed on his flopprimmed hat and went back outside.

"I felt sorta the same way about MacLean,"

he told May, "before this evening. But what else can you call that warning he sent by Dahl? Sure, Dahl's got a crooked finger in this some place, an' I'm goin' to find out just what he's up to. But it's MacLean that's back of it."

"If you could let MacLean have passage through here, Jim," May persisted, "it would help him. At least during the winter. It wouldn't hurt the stubble field."

"An' come spring, when I put the fence back up, I'd have MacLean tell me that his cows have to water on Redstone Creek." Jim grunted and pulled savagely at his hatbrim. "No, May. We can't give in an inch. It's here an' now. I'm goin' up to see old man Thompson. He's in this as much as I am. Mebbe between us we can get word to the Government Land Office in Plentywood, or the Sheridan County sheriff."

Jim's square jaw was set, hard as granite. May knew the futility of trying to stop him now and stepped back through the doorway. Half-way to the sod-walled barn, Jim wheeled around and came back on his long legs to place the heavy rifle in her hands.

"You might need this—more'n I will," he said flatly, and then turned and trotted to the barn to get out the black gelding of his plow team. "We'll figger out a way," he called. "Don't you fret." Then he was lost in the gathering darkness.

* * *

Jim and old man Thompson didn't figure out a way. Jim slid from his bare-backed plow horse in front of Thompson's little sod shanty and knew that trouble had beat him there. The door was wide open. The place was dark, and Thompson's old white mare lay dead near the lean-to barn.

Jim stepped up onto the front stoop, stumbled, and almost fell over the old homesteader's body sprawled in the doorway. He got out his block of sulphur matches, and under the fitful yellow gleam saw the blood on the scrawny old back. Thompson was dead. The shack hadn't been disturbed, and there was nothing Jim could find to indicate who had killed the good-natured old farmer.

It was no longer a land fight. MacLean had made his play, and now it was murder. Jim's eyes were stony as he mounted his black, and a cold lump gathered in his belly. He was no gun-fighter. He was a farmer. His farmer's instinct was for peace, and it was calling to him now, urging him to head his horse toward home. Better to gather up his little family and make for town, than wait and be wiped out. Maybe killed like old man Thompson. At thirty, a man could start over again.

When this trouble first raised its ugly head, Jim Bradley had felt a wild seething anger. But that kind of anger soon burned itself out,

leaving the hardened clinkers of a fixed and stubborn purpose. The very nature of the man, the hard determination and dauntless spirit that had been behind his filing on the homestead, was not to be swamped by fear.

Jim rattled his brogans against the black's ribs and headed west toward Thompson's line fence. If that was cut, he'd have some proof that this was MacLean's move to oust the farmers from the pass. Maybe Lambert had done it, under orders from the Cross owner.

Not a strand of the tight fence had been cut. Jim rode the whole length of it, from the beginning on the north side of the pass down to where it joined his own fence on the tree claim. And there was no sign of Cross cattle near the fence.

Jim finally pulled to a halt, puzzled, remembering May's words about MacLean. Could he have been mistaken? Could Scotty MacLean be the tolerant cowman she believed him to be? Or was he the high-and-mighty cowman that Jim Bradley thought he was? Jim shook his head. The time or two he'd met and talked to the big red-headed Scot, MacLean seemed to have only contempt and harsh language for homesteaders—particularly for Thompson and himself, because their fences blocked him off on the east.

There was only one way to know for sure. He'd go to the source of the thing. He'd pull the old lion's whiskers. Jim swallowed a couple of times to get the lump back where it belonged, and to get a hold on himself. He'd have to reason this thing out, not rush into it headlong without considering what he was doing. It was one thing to talk about paying a visit to Scotty MacLean. It was quite another to ride toward the big Cross outfit with a chip on his shoulder—and no gun on his hip.

Jim found Thompson's gate and struck out through the pass. A half-hour later he topped the flat table-land that made headquarters for the Cross-in-a-Circle spread.

THE MOON was overhead now, a cold Fall moon that cast silver light over the prairie, the occasional clumps of cottonwoods, and the thickets of chokecherry in the ravines. Yellow lamplight spilled from the long, low bunkhouse, a dim substitute for the moonlight that lit up the corrals and cattle sheds.

Jim slid from his horse and walked forward slowly, to rap on the plank door of the bunkhouse. The sound was a hollow voice in the night and matched the pound of his heart.

A heavy cursing broke out inside, followed by the scrape of a chair and the dull thud of boots. Suddenly the door was jerked open, and big Scotty MacLean stood there surveying the lean blinking farmer. There was no welcome in the florid face, nor in the bright blue eyes that peered out from under shaggy red brows.

The cowman's huge bulk towered over Jim Bradley. The rancher's thick red beard seemed actually to curl with the savage temper flooding the red face.

"I've come to talk, MacLean," Jim opened. "I want—"

"Bradley!" Scotty exploded savagely. "Thought I told you hoemen never to set foot on this outfit—you an' that old fool, Thompson."

Jim eyed the rancher coldly. He expected trouble and braced himself for it, but he wouldn't make the first move. He'd come here to Scotty MacLean to settle this thing once and for all—peacefully if he could. He was armed only with words and his two good fists.

"Thompson's dead," he said flatly.

"Dead?" MacLean's heavy brows thrust out at Jim, and the red-headed Scot was suddenly still. One eyebrow lifted, opening that eye a little wider. The other became only a thin streak of light that glittered in the yellow lamplight.

Jim nodded. All at once he realized that this was the turning point. If Scotty believed him, he'd get cooperation. If the big Scot didn't believe him—

"Dead. Shot in the back. What do you know about it, MacLean—an where's that Ord Lambert gunny of yours?"

MacLean's pent-up breath came out, an explosive thunder. He turned to the half-dozen cowhands around the deal table in the center of the floor.

"Put up them guns, boys," he ordered. Then: "Come in, Bradley."

Jim stalked inside. His gray eyes circled the cowmen and came back to rest on the big rancher. Lambert wasn't among them.

"Now, sit down." MacLean waved a hand toward a box against the wall. "What about this man, Lambert? Seems like I heard tell of him—a gunman. But he don't work for me."

Jim remained standing. A man could move quicker that way, and to stand gave a man more confidence in himself. He wouldn't sit under the watchful eyes of this tough crew.

"That's what Ross Dahl told me, that he was on your payroll," Jim said. "He brought this Lambert out to my place just at dusk, told me I had to clear off an' tear down my fence. Lambert was, accordin' to Dahl, your north line-camp rider."

"A lie," roared MacLean. "Where is this gunman?" MacLean was on his feet now.

"That's what I'm askin' you," Jim said thinly.

"I sent an old homeguard, Slim Norton, up there to that linecamp. He's stoveup. I sorta pensioned him to that job for the winter," MacLean said roughly. "I sorta felt sorry for old Slim—"

"You felt sorry?" Jim scoffed.

MacLean bristled. "Aye. That's my right, farmer," he said in quick anger.

"Then this Slim Norton ought to be up there at your camp?" Jim asked. "Not this Ord Lambert?"

Jim watched the big Scot stare a moment at his cowhands, saw the sudden gleam that sprang into the big man's eyes.

"We'll find out," he said harshly. "You boys stay put. Me an' this grubhoe'll go up there pronto. Come on!" he roared.

MacLean brushed by Jim, stepped outside, and lumbered off toward the corral. In two minutes he was beside Jim on a big blaze-face sorrel, a sixgun on his wide hip and a Winchester in the saddle boot.

"If this is some of your dang farmer foolishness," MacLean warned, "you'll pay for it, Bradley. I asked you before to cut them fences across the pass, an' I been waitin', patient-like. You're gonna cut 'em, savvy. But I don't hold with no gunnies sayin' they work for me when they don't. We'll get to the bottom of this here Thompson killin'—then we'll talk about that fence cuttin'. But you'll cut it!" he added on a savage note. "I'll not be corraled by no grubhoes."

"I'm not tryin' to corral you," Jim said hotly. "That's my land. I raise flax on it—good flax. Fifteen bushels to the acre last summer. In the bottom land I cut the hay, stacked it. I'll not have your critters overrunnin' that land."

MacLean's blue eyes narrowed.

"Come on," he said gruffly.

THE TWO men, farmer and rancher, struck out east.

"To check on that there yarn of yours about old man Thompson," MacLean explained to Jim, as the homesteader tried to keep up with the cowman's big gelding. "It'd better be like you said—"

Scotty led the way after they had reached the line fence and wheeled onto Thompson's land. The shanty was still dark, as it had been when Jim stopped there, but with a difference.

Jim remembered he had left the door open, as he had found it, with old Thompson's body blocking the doorway. Now the door was closed. Jim slid from his lathered black, stood there waiting as MacLean wrenched an upright loose from the lean-to and began hammering on the door.

"You can save yourself that work," Jim said flatly. "Thompson's body was right there in the doorway when I was here. It's gone."

MacLean whirled around on his boots.

"Tryin' to crawl out now, huh?" he grunted, swinging savagely at the heavy door.

"No," Jim said, "and I can smell dirt."

"Dirt?" MacLean stared, and pushed back his big hat. "What you tryin' to pull now?"

"Just that, MacLean. I'm a farmer. I can smell fresh-turned sod or soil as far as I can see. And right now I smell fresh earth. Somebody's been diggin' around this place since I stopped here two-three hours ago."

"I thought sheepherders was crazy," MacLean grumbled, "but you hoemen've got them faded any day. Where at's this here dirt you're yowlin' about?"

Jim was slowly circling the little shanty now, his thin nostrils wide and quivering. Then he found what he was looking for—a low mound of freshly-turned earth about ten feet from Thompson's well. He searched through the short buffalo grass, found a long-handled shovel and began to dig away the earth. MacLean watched him, cursing softly at the farmer's foolishness.

But when Jim's shovel touched something solid, the rancher struck a match and held it over the hole. Two feet down old man Thompson's bony face stared up at him.

Scotty MacLean sucked in a quick breath. "That's him. Well, I'll be a dumb shorthorn, Bradley! You was talkin' straight, all right." He struck another light from the block of Norsky matches, and stared again at the wrinkled old face. He turned to Jim and his big face was heavy and serious. "This here, if it gets out, it'll throw this range into bloody hell."

Jim nodded and shoveled back some of the dirt. Then he poked the shovel into the soft mound and tied his handkerchief to the handle.

"So we can show the law," he said. "An' now, MacLean, let's see this Ord Lambert."

"I'll see him, all right, an' Ross Dahl will have to do some tall talkin'. That toadyin' parasite's been hangin' around my outfit, promisin' to get you an' Thompson out the pass. He said both of you was goin' to pull out—sell out. Offered to sell your two places to me for three dollars an acre."

"An' you agreed to buy?" Jim asked flatly.

"Not me! No, I ain't buyin' somethin' what's already mine."

They turned north for the Cross-in-a-Circle line camp, MacLean in the lead. They passed over Thompson's tree claim at the edge of the pass, followed along the creek through a silent cold night. There was no life, no sign of life. Only the chill promise of winter was with them, in the wind sweeping across the range, through the pass and up the shallow bottom land of the valley. There was moisture on the grass, a cold wetness that would turn to frost before sunup. Far to the west there was a sudden outbreak of coyote yapping, then all was still again until they came within sight of the small, sod-covered, windowless shack, the Cross line camp.

A thin spiral of smoke came from the canted stovepipe. Jim reined up and watched Mac-

Lean dismount. The rancher pulled his Winchester from the boot.

Jim slid to the ground. "You could loan me that six of yours, MacLean," he said.

"Loan you my six?" MacLean growled. "You go hide your head, soddy. This here is man's work."

"That's what I figgered," Jim answered, but the big Scot seemed not to hear the words. Jim trotted toward the cabin, ahead of MacLean. He'd show the cowman. Just because he was a farmer and didn't wear a gun and high-heeled boots didn't mean he wasn't as good as any lazy horsebacker.

At the doorway he halted. He had no weapon, not a thing but the pliers thonged to his overalls. He knew fear then. It wasn't plain foolhardiness that motivated him, but a desire to show this puffed-up rancher that even a farmer could be what the cowmen called "a man to ride the river with."

Scotty shouldered Jim aside at the door, shoved it open and stamped inside. The farmer followed, and both he and MacLean stopped there as Ord Lambert and Ross Dahl jumped up from a table that held bottle and glasses. The two wheeled around to face MacLean and Jim.

Dahl's little green eyes slitted. His mouth gaped. Lambert cursed hoarsely and crouched there behind the table.

"All right, Dahl, what you doin' here?" MacLean demanded.

Ross Dahl's thin lips stretched in a smile.

"Why—Scotty, this is Ord Lambert. Slim Norton—"

"Norton quit," Lambert broke in. "Dahl said he'd fix it with you to put me on your payroll—hold down this line camp."

MacLean's bushy beard bristled like a dog's neck-hair.

"I seen your homely mug on a poster, feller," he rumbled. "You warn't usin' the same name, but Lambert, or whatever you call yourself, you ain't usin' this linecamp for a hide-out from the law. Where's Slim Norton?"

Jim spoke up then. "I smell fresh sod, MacLean," he said. "It's strong outside. I'll bet these two have killed Norton and buried him, like they done poor old Thompson."

"I don't smell sod," MacLean snapped. "I smell polecat. An' it's too strong for my nose." He flashed a look at Jim—a strangely friendly glance. He reached around with his left hand, shucked his six-shooter from leather and passed it over to the farmer.

"Uh—thanks," Jim said.

"Reckon I been somewhat of a dang fool," MacLean growled. "Anybody'd brace a pair like this without bein' heeled has got the sand needed for bein' a part of this here range. Yep, reckon it's you an' me, the cowmen an' the soddies, against snakes like this here gunny

an' that slimy townman there in them fancy duds."

Jim merely grinned at MacLean. "I guess—I reckon so," he nodded dryly.

JIM DIDN'T have time to cock the six-shooter, for at that moment Ord Lambert made his play for the .45 on his hip. His draw was a blur of swift motion. Ross Dahl leaped to one side, right hand stabbing for the spring holster under his left arm.

Gunfire and thunder filled the little shack. MacLean fired once, then his Winchester drooped and fell from his hands. The big rancher cried out, and crow-hopped backward, to fall out through the open doorway.

"Look out for Dahl," MacLean shouted from where he lay. "He's got a hide-out gun, Bradley."

Jim thumbed the six, saw red blossom and wet Dahl's shirt. Ross Dahl spun half around with the force of Jim's shooting, but he wasn't out of the fight. He twisted back, fired twice. Jim felt sharp pain in his left arm, high in his thigh. He stumbled, fell just as Lambert triggered again.

The slender outlaw dropped his gun after that and seemed to fold over. He grabbed at his stomach where MacLean's lead had sounded him and sprawled down beneath the table.

The smoke-filled shack whirled in front of Jim Bradley. There was no more pain, only shock and surprise for the farmer. He couldn't see MacLean, and struggled up on an elbow.

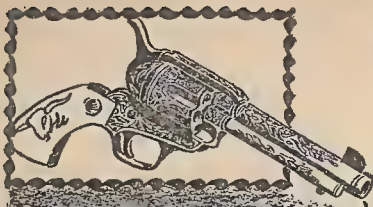
"Bradley, you sneakin' skunk!" Dahl belted, and grabbed a chair to keep himself erect. He shoved the chair before him, slowly closing the distance between them. Savage hate flamed in his green eyes, and the cords stood out on his long neck as he tried to lift and cock his six-shooter. He could hardly make it, swung his arm from the shoulder, managed to slide the gun over the back of the chair.

Jim saw that long gun barrel pointing at him and knew sudden worry for May and little Jimmy. He had to move, to roll out of the line of fire. He had to get back to the homestead. Cold sweat stood out on his lip as he willed himself up onto his knees.

He launched himself sideways as Dahl fired. The lead fanned his ear, slapped into the wall behind him. He pushed up on an elbow, and his own gun roared and bucked in his hand. Dahl stiffened, surprise on his wide mouth. Then he fell, to roll against the wall, booted feet beating feebly at the boards.

Jim got to his knees, pushed himself to his feet. He staggered outside, to sprawl full length over the groaning cowman on the front step. He tried to get up, but there was no more strength in him. He was still there,

(Continued on page 127)



FOR BULLETS, BOOTHILL



Stirring Novel of Sheep- Cowman War!

Crow River water turned red with the blood of a thousand stinking woollies when Ed McLain issued his grim gunsmoke invitation to his graze-hungry, river-raiding neighbor: "Sheeper, come and get your needin's!"

Chapter I

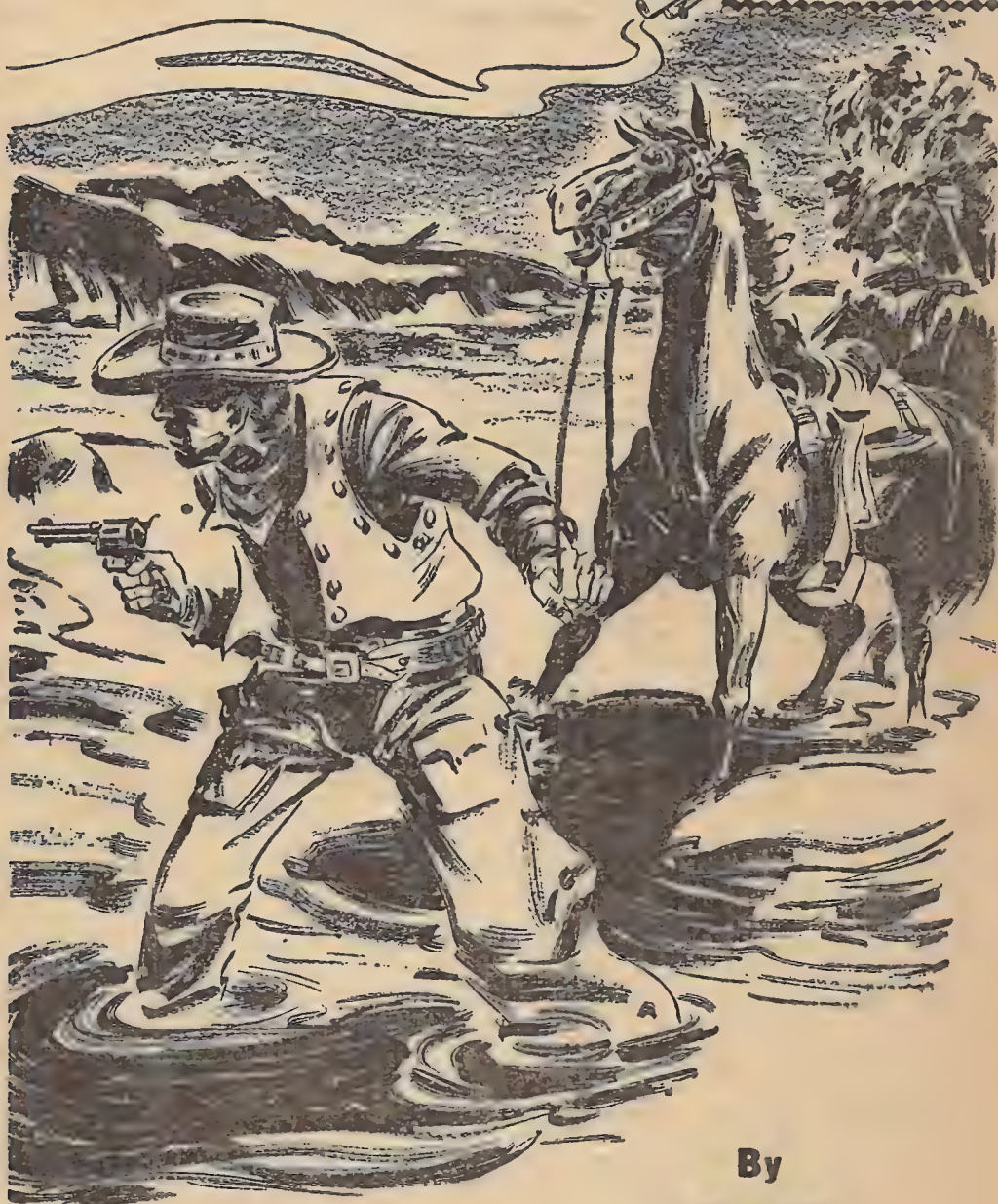
"SING A SONG OF SIXGUNS"

IT WAS a mournful little ditty, something he'd composed himself as he rode the lonely trails. It was a parody on a Mother Goose rhyme, and he hummed it half-aloud as he rode along the edge of the draw.

"Sing a song of sixguns,
A belly full of rye.
Five and twenty horse thieves
Swinging in the sky!"

He had no doubt it was the singing that

BEANS, AND A GRAVE!



Again Ed McLain roared,
"Come on, Morrell!"

By
**WILLIAM
HEUMAN**

frightened a man on a chestnut horse out of the draw and sent him spurring madly toward the east. He caught a glimpse of a black frock coat, and he noticed that the chestnut had three white stockings. He noticed these things because little things like that oftentimes meant the difference between life and death.

Ed McLain let the sorrel pick its own way down into the draw, but he kept both eyes open now, and his right hand close to the pearl handle of his big Colt. He still hummed his song, but he was slightly off key.

A gun banged off to his left and the slug kicked up dirt a yard in front of the sorrel. The horse snorted and backed away. Ed steadied the animal before it could start to buck. He didn't draw his own weapon, knowing that this shot across his bow had been simply a warning, or an indication that he was not alone in the draw.

ED SAW a gray gelding first, a big animal with a white face, and then he saw a man sitting on the ground, his back against a big rock, the gun balanced on his right knee, the muzzle still pointing at Ed.

The man on the ground was grinning coldly. He was a big, clumsy man with a fat, red face and small, sea-green eyes. He had a bulbous nose and thick, sensuous lips.

"Come riding, Buck," the man said, "and keep your hands off that gun."

A lazy man, he didn't get off the ground, but Ed noticed that the gun was very steady in his right hand. Ed let the sorrel walk over in his direction. He sat there and he fished in his shirt pocket for his tobacco pouch, waiting for the other man to make the conversation.

"Where do you figure you're going, Jack?" the clumsy man asked.

Carefully, Ed rolled a cigarette. He was a tall, lean man with whipcord muscles in his arms and shoulders. His gray eyes moved from the man on the ground, to the gun, to the gray horse standing a few yards away.

"Your land?" he asked.

"It might be." The man on the ground grinned.

"It might be Flying K range," Ed McLain observed, lighting the cigarette. You Leah Kimbrough?"

"That's not funny," the fat man said softly. "I asked where you were heading?"

"Just riding," Ed said.

"Don't stop," the fat man told him. "Or it might be the last ride you'll ever take."

Ed regarded him curiously, no emotion showing on his face. He knew that the man on the ground was watching him intently, wondering if he'd get any more information if he continued to ask questions, and then realizing that it was hopeless.

"Go ahead," the fat man said. He didn't

get up from the ground. And he didn't smile.

Ed turned the sorrel up out of the draw. He rode leisurely and he didn't look back. For one brief moment he thought the fat man would put a bullet through his back, and he felt his back muscles contracting. He didn't turn around, and then he was over the rim of the draw.

He forgot about the fat man sitting against the rock. He thought about the man in the black frock coat who had ridden a chestnut horse with three white stockings. This man had not wanted to be seen.

Riding due west Ed crossed a big meadow through which a stream of water trickled, its banks lined with willows. The land started to rise here and he saw cattle grazing on the slopes. The grass was good, better than he'd ever seen it in the South. A cool breeze swept down from the snow-capped Sawtooth Range through which he'd come two days before. He started to hum again, and he was still humming when he came in sight of the Flying K ranch, a collection of weather-beaten buildings scattered along a fifty foot wide stream.

He saw horses in the corral and tiny figures moving among the buildings. There was a new-mown hayfield a short distance up along the stream. Crossing a meadow and coming closer to the spread, Ed McLain saw a chestnut horse tied to the corral. The chestnut had three white legs.

Five minutes later Ed rode past the first of the Flying K barns. A man came out of the bunkhouse to look at him. Another man, snaking a horse out of the corral, stopped, rope in hand, to watch him cross toward the ranch house.

Then a squat, dark-haired man with hard black eyes came out of the barn and stood there, watching Ed, his hands on his hips. They were big, powerful hands. He carried a Smith & Wesson .44 on his left hip.

"All right, Jack," he said tersely.

Ed pulled up a half-dozen yards from him, and then looked toward the porch of the ranch house. It was a long, low affair, originally built of logs, finished later with clapboards. Several wings had been added through the years as the ranch grew. Old vines twined up around the porch pillars, shading the front of the house. Ed could see two people sitting in the shadows on the porch.

The black-haired man came over from the barn, watching Ed narrowly. He said grimly, "You got business here?"

"I'll tell Miss Kimbrough that," Ed said softly. He remembered that that was one of the reasons he'd consented to come out to the Flying K after being offered the job in Talbot. A woman was hiring hardcase riders, and he couldn't quite get over that. The yellow-haired man in the saloon in Talbot had had a drink

with him, sized him up over that drink, and then stated his case. There was seventy-five dollars a month and very little work for a man who was handy with a sixgun and who did not particularly care for sheep.

Both of these qualifications had fitted Ed. He'd been running low on cash, and he did not like the smell of sheep. He said he would run out to the Flying K after he heard that a woman owned it.

The black-haired man regarded Ed sourly for several moments and then scowled, "Come along."

Ed McLain slid out of the saddle, tied the horse to a corral post, and then followed this man, whom he took for the Flying K foreman. They walked toward the porch in silence, and Ed had a closer look at the chestnut with the three white stockings. He saw the owner of the horse a few moments later, black frock hat resting on his knees, pale, almost colorless eyes studying Ed shrewdly.

The man wore a black frock coat and string tie, and Ed immediately tabbed him as a lawyer. He was tall, clean-shaven, with curly brown hair—a good-looking man.

The girl with him was Leah Kimbrough, owner of the Flying K. Miss Kimbrough, Ed McLain had imagined, would be in her thirties, possibly forties, a spinster, hawk-faced, cold as ice.

He found a girl who was not more than twenty-five—and she could have been less. Her hair was the color of burnished copper, offset by clear blue eyes. She was of medium height. "Yes, Kramer?" she said.

Kramer scowled at Ed. He said, nodding at Ed, "He wants to see you."

"Jorgens sent me," Ed volunteered. "Said there was work for me on the Flying K." He watched the man in the chair scratch his chin, and he thought he saw a faint smile playing around the man's thin-lipped mouth. He wondered at that. He could see that this man didn't recognize him as the rider who'd nearly interrupted the conversation he'd had with the fat man in the draw.

"Did Jorgens tell you the kind of work we had open?" Miss Kimbrough asked him.

"Reckon I got a faint idea," Ed admitted. He studied her face carefully, and he knew that she was at her wits' end. She was not the type of woman to hire hardcase riders with hair triggers on their sixguns. She'd done this because it was a last resort.

"Kramer will tell you your duties," she said. Ed noticed that she didn't even ask his name. He touched the brim of his flat-crowned hat and walked after the surly Kramer. He rolled another cigarette in the shadows of the barn and sat down on a bale of hay.

Kramer, Flying K ramrod, turned around to look at him disdainfully.

"So you're another one?" he snapped.

"And you're one, too," Ed told him.

Kramer stared at him. "What?" he asked.

"A big head," Ed McLain said coolly, "who's not tough enough to hold up his end of the work and his boss has to bring in gunhands to help him do the work he hasn't got the guts to do himself."

Kramer's eyes widened, and then his jaw came out. He had a heavy jaw and a blunt nose like a bulldog.

He said softly, "Friend, you're askin' for a damned good lickin'."

ED LOOKED at the cigarette in his fingers, and he braced his feet beneath him. He smiled at Kramer, but he didn't get up. It was an open invitation, and Kramer, grinningly, accepted it.

"Might just as well get acquainted now," the Flying K man chuckled. He stepped over and slid the barn door shut. He was not as tall as Ed but considerably heavier. He had long, powerful arms, thick wrists, a tremendous torso.

Watching him coolly, calculatingly, Ed McLain knew that in a rough and tumble fight he could never expect to beat Kramer. The man's thick skull would take heavier punches than he could ever throw, and there was always the possibility that he would break the hands which had been his livelihood the past ten years.

When Kramer slid the heavy bolt across the barn door on the inside, Ed's fingers closed around an old horseshoe hanging on a peg just above his head.

Kramer turned from the door and charged directly at Ed, head lowered, reaching for Ed's waist. He came very fast, thinking to catch the taller man before he could get up from the bale of hay.

Ed swung his right hand in an overhead motion as he slid away from the bale. He didn't hit Kramer too hard with the horseshoe but hard enough to knock him to his knees.

The Flying K ramrod got up, blinking dazedly, staggering, only half conscious. Ed hit him twice and knocked him to the barn floor. Kramer lay there, staring up at the hay loft, mouth open. He was moving his arms and legs feebly. His head was not cut, but Ed knew he would have a lump on it the size of a hen's egg by nightfall.

Calmly, Ed walked to the barn door and swung it open again. Several of the Flying K hands had seen Kramer's move, and knowing what it was, had headed for the barn at a half run. They were standing outside, breathless, when Ed opened the door. He saw them look in at the dazed Kramer, and then stare at him, open-mouthed.

A little weazened man with crinkly blue

eyes murmured, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Ed McLain walked over to his horse and took off the warbag. He walked with the bag toward the bunkhouse, a cigarette in his mouth, the little man walking after him, a broad grin on his homely face. He had a tremendous nose and sand-colored hair.

Ed stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse, looking at the dozen and a half bunks in the long, rectangular room. He said over his shoulder, "Which one should I take, mister?"

The little man chuckled, "After what you just did, friend, have yore pick. Take two if you want 'em."

Ed McLain smiled and walked down to the south end of the room. He saw a bunk there which didn't appear to be occupied, and he dropped his bag on the floor beside it.

The little man said, "Name's Wing—George Wing."

"That so?" Ed said.

George Wing started to roll a cigarette with gnarled, brown fingers. He said softly, "Reckon you boys never have names, do you?"

"Call me Smith," Ed said.

Wing's grin broadened. "We got three Smiths already down along the Crow," he said. "Think o' somethin' better than that."

Ed sat down on the bunk. He said, "That our job, along the Crow?"

Wing nodded. "Miss Kimbrough has sixteen hands on the east bank o' the Crow, holdin' back fifteen thousand head o' sheep Ben Rayburn figures on movin' across the river."

Ed McLain stared at the floor thoughtfully. "Anybody killed yet?" he asked.

"It's comin' to that," Wing growled. "Fer a sheepman, Rayburn's a pretty tough hombre. He's had them woollies grazin' on the west slopes o' the Crow fer two months an' he's got to move 'em soon or they'll starve. Only grass is on the other side o' the river where Flyin' K has been since Leah Kimbrough's grandpa came into the country with the fur trappers."

"The other outfits fighting Rayburn?" Ed wanted to know.

"They're small," Wing explained, "an' every one of 'em kin be bought off if Rayburn kin knock down Flyin' K. They're still ranchmen 'cause Flyin' K hasn't quit. When Miss Kimbrough quits, the whole bench is turned over to sheep."

"So Miss Kimbrough is hiring gunnies to protect the river," Ed murmured. "How far has Rayburn gone?"

"Brought a parcel o' toughs along with him," Wing said. "Every once in a while they cross the Crow at night an' raid Flyin' K stock. They run damn near two hundred head into a dry gulch last week. I spent two hours shootin' what wasn't killed outright."

Ed McLain smiled grimly. Studying this

pattern, he realized that it was the same all over. He'd been in a dozen such feuds—cattleman against sheepman, cattleman against cattleman, fights over ranges, fights over railroad rights, water rights. It was always the same. One party harassed the other until it came to a head in a short, sweet fight. Then the man with the most professional gun throwers got what he wanted. It was as simple as that.

"Who was that chap on the porch with Miss Kimbrough?" Ed asked suddenly.

"Jonas Morrell," Wing said, "lawyer friend o' Miss Kimbrough's."

"How good a friend?" Ed wanted to know.

Wing looked at him. "Reckon they'll be gettin' married one o' these days," he said.

Ed rubbed his nose and leaned back in the bunk. He learned more from George Wing because the little man was lonely and wanted someone to talk to. Wing had worked for Leah Kimbrough's father, and he wasn't getting along with the new boss the girl had brought in.

"What about Kramer?" Ed asked him. "He an old Flyin' K hand?"

"Buck Kramer come to Flyin' K a year ago," Wing said grimly. "Morrell brought him over after Jack Simson quit an' started ranchin' fer himself up in the Elk Creek country."

ED WAS still sitting on the bunk when the men came in for supper. Buck Kramer straggled in after the others, still looking a little dazed. He hadn't seen the horseshoe in Ed's hand and he was still wondering how he'd been knocked out so easily. He glared at Ed and sat down at the other end of the table.

There was little talk in the bunkhouse. Ed looked at the other men as they came in. There were only seven of them here, and he realized that the others were probably eating at line shacks along the river.

Kramer said sullenly, looking straight at Ed, "You an' Wing take the No. 8 shack to-night."

Wing nodded and Ed McLain placed both hands on the table before getting up. He said, "Any particular orders?"

"You know what in hell you been hired for," Kramer scowled.

Ed grinned and went out, Wing following him. The little man saddled a buckskin horse in the barn while Ed waited outside for him. The moon was coming up over the Sawtooth Mountains—a half moon, very bright. Ed McLain watched it; he watched the girl coming down the porch steps, walking toward the barn. He noticed that the chestnut horse was gone.

Leah Kimbrough came straight toward him, even though he'd been standing in the shadows. He knew that she'd been watching from the porch, waiting for him to come out of the

bunkhouse because she had something to say.

She stopped in front of Ed and he touched his hat.

"You didn't tell me your name before," she said.

"Smith," Ed said, and he saw the slow smile slide across her face.

"So Bud Jorgens sent you down," she said quietly. "He tell you how much we were paying our hands."

"Seventy-five," Ed said, "for the kind of work I do."

"You—you have a price?" Leah Kimbrough asked him, wincing a little.

Ed hooked his hands in his gunbelt. "A man can be killed," he observed, "defending himself." He knew that the average cowhand seldom received more than thirty a month. He'd taken as much as one hundred and fifty and two hundred dollars for the "protection" he afforded various people.

"We do not want anyone killed," the girl said slowly. "I am only interested in protecting my property. If those sheep ever get across the river the Flying K is finished."

Ed nodded. George Wing came out of the stable, leading his horse. He looked at the two and kept going down to the water trough near the corral.

"You—you seem different from the other men I've hired," Leah Kimbrough said suddenly. "How long have you been in this work?"

Ed laughed bitterly. "A long time," he stated. "Too long." He didn't like to look back, but he'd been twenty-three when he quit the Bar M ranch and went into stock raising himself. He'd had seventy-five head of cattle, and in a year and half, sweating blood, working eighteen hours a day, he'd built the herd up to three hundred, only to see every animal freeze in a blizzard.

He'd looked at the pile of carcasses in a snow-filled gulch, and he'd gone into town and gotten drunk for the first time in eighteen months. That had been five years ago, and he'd drifted after that, doing anything, doing nothing. A man had offered him a hundred a month, not to punch cows, but to provide protection against other ranchers who were after his water.

After that Ed had walked easy and he'd carried a big gun. He'd had a mark on him, and Bud Jorgens in the Talbot saloon had recognized that mark. It was the mark of a profession.

Leah Kimbrough said, "I've regretted having to hire professional fighters, but I was unable to hire men in town. None of them wanted anything to do with the kind of men now working for Rayburn. He was getting ready to cross the river and I was short handed."

"Seems like Rayburn started the trouble," Ed said. "He's jumping your range. You have a right to protect yourself."

"If you feel that you don't want to work for Flying K," the girl said slowly, "you still have the opportunity to move on."

"Reckon I'll stay," Ed told her. "I'm a curious man."

He rode off with George Wing then, and Wing said, "Thought I told you she was marryin' Jonas Morrell."

"That's right," Ed admitted. "I forgot."

Chapter II

SHEEPER'S BULLET BAIT

THEY PASSED a number of small huts built back in the timber along the Crow River. Ed McLain looked at sour-faced men, guns across their knees, sitting outside these huts, watching the river. None of them spoke to Wing.

"Reckon they don't like themselves," Wing murmured. "Not that I blame 'em. They're touchy as all hell."

They relieved two other men in No. 8 shack, the last post of defense along the Crow. The river widened here to over a hundred and fifty feet, and Wing informed Ed that it was too deep to ford.

"If Rayburn tries to come across the Crow," the puncher observed, "he'll make his attempt south o' the ranch. River's plenty narrow there, an' shallow."

Ed took his sixgun from the holster, broke it, and examined the shells. He squinted down the barrel toward the river and he said softly, "Custom is for a man who doesn't like another to send him where the lead is thickest. What's the matter with Kramer?"

George Wing shrugged, but he was watching Ed closely. He said, "Buck Kramer never had any damned use fer me either, but I'm never near where Rayburn's toughs cross an' raid our stuff."

"That could mean something," Ed smiled, "and it could mean nothing."

Wing took the first watch while Ed slept on the cot inside the shack. Wing got him up at one o'clock in the morning and he said, "Quiet as the inside of a church."

Ed pulled on his boots and went out into the night. He took a drink from a bucket of water on a bench outside the shack, and then he walked down to the water's edge. It was much darker now than it had been earlier in the evening. The moon was moving in and out of a bank of dark clouds.

He stared across the river for some time and then headed back toward the shack. It was then that he heard the faint shots far to the south. Wing tumbled out of the shack a mo-

ment later, and Ed said to him, "We ride that way, Wing?"

The old puncher listened closely. There were more shots and the sounds seemed to be going away farther toward the south.

"They'll be gone in a few minutes," Ed McLain said. "We stand here all night?"

"Reckon that's right," Wing growled. "Orders from Buck Kramer. Buck figures Rayburn might be makin' a bluff at one section an' then when we all skip out he'll run his damned woollies across some other place."

Ed frowned. "It's logical," he admitted. "So we sit here and let Rayburn run the tallow off Flying K stock."

"You got any ideas?" Wing asked him.

"Where are Rayburn's sheep?" Ed wanted to know.

"I'd figure they was a half-dozen miles on the other side o' the Crow, up among the hills."

Ed walked over to his horse. He called over his shoulder, "We could take a look at them, George."

"Sure," Wing muttered. "You mean we leave our section open?"

"No sheep coming across here tonight," Ed explained patiently. "We'd have smelled them a long time ago if they were headed this way."

"Kramer never told us to cross the river," Wing said.

"That an order?" Ed grinned.

"Hell," Wing said, "Buck knew damned well none o' the boys were hankerin' to cross over an' take the lead Rayburn's toughs would throw at us. He never even mentioned it."

"Then we'll cross," Ed told him. He was whistling softly as he rode down along the river, looking for a good spot to cross.

George Wing followed, shaking his head. "He's on the job a couple o' hours an' he's turnin' everything upside down."

A hundred yards upstream Ed turned the sorrel into the water and let the animal pick its way out carefully until its legs slipped off a ledge. His gunbelt slung around his neck, Ed slipped out of the saddle then, and clinging to the saddle horn, let the sorrel pull him across the river. He heard George Wing coming behind him, cursing at the coldness of the water.

They went up on the other bank and into a willow thicket. Ed tried to wring some of the water from his clothing. He strapped the gunbelt around his waist and then he rolled a cigarette. He'd carried the little tobacco pouch in his teeth while swimming across the river.

George Wing chattered bitterly, "Why in hell do I foller these young fellers? I should be sleepin' in that shack across the river, enjoyin' life."

"You weren't happy," Ed told him calmly. "You were sick of waiting for something to happen. It's happening now."

"Yeah?" Wing said. "All I know is that I'm damned wet an' I'm on the other side o' the Crow."

"We'll look fro Rayburn's woollies," Ed smiled. "That'll keep us warm."

"Warm, or dead," Wing said sourly, "if we run into any o' Rayburn's gunhands."

Ed McLain smoked his cigarette through, listening for further sounds to the south. They heard a shot, very distant, and then silence.

"We'll ride," Ed said.

They pushed in from the river, Ed walking his horse. They went over one fold in the hills, and then another. George Wing stopped his horse then and pointed. Ed saw the tiny spot of light on the horizon.

"That'll be a sheepherder's campfire," the puncher muttered. "Now you know where they are."

"We'll ride around them a bit," Ed said softly. "I want to see if sheep can run as fast as cattle."

Wing said queerly, "You thinkin' o' runnin' Rayburn's sheep?"

"Rayburn ran Flying K stock," Ed said patiently. "We'll let him know we can play his game also."

Wing thought that over and then started to laugh. "Reckon I'd like to see Rayburn's face in the mornin'," he grinned.

ED SMELLED the sheep before they were within a half-mile of them. Wrinkling his nose, he swung the sorrel toward the north, away from the herders' fire. He could see the animals then, a white, blurry mass in front of him. He said to Wing, "We'll hif them here and just keep riding." He took his sixgun from the holster and held it over his head. He rode forward then, emptying the gun, and when it was empty he smashed in among the frightened animals, waving his hat, yelling at the top of his voice.

Wing drove in from a point twenty-five yards down the line, and the sheep spilled over the plains in all directions. Ed thought he heard a faint shout from the campfire as he continued to ride through the flock.

The sheep were running now, spreading out into the hills. Ed managed to refill the sixgun and he emptied it again. He heard Wing shooting spasmodically off to his right, charging up and down among the sheep, yipping.

In ten minutes it was over and two-thirds of the flock were scattered for miles among the hills. Ed heard riders coming up and he drifted back in the direction of the Crow, picking up Wing as he went. The little man was laughing silently.

They swam back across the river, and then Wing started up a roaring fire over which they could dry their clothing. Ed sat inside the shack, smoking a cigarette.

He heard Wing say softly, "There'll be hell to pay in the mornin'. Rayburn's a pretty tough hombre."

They had a leisurely breakfast in the morning, and then rode back to the ranch. Passing one of the shacks, a Flying K rider came out and stared at them. He said to Wing:

"You hear somebody went across the river an' scattered Rayburn's sheep from here to Kingdom Come?"

"No!" Wing said in mock surprise. "Now who would do that to poor Ben Rayburn?"

The Flying K man regarded them quizzically. He gave Ed a long, steady stare. Then he shook his head.

"Reckon somebody will pay fer that," he murmured.

Ed McLain grinned at him. When they came up to the Flying K ranch house, Buck Kramer was waiting for them outside the bunkhouse. Kramer's lips were tight.

He said savagely, "Who in hell asked you boys to go across the Crow last night?"

"Who?" George Wing asked innocently.

"Rayburn could have come around you," Kramer grated, "knocked you off, an' crossed every damned woollie in his flock."

"He didn't," Ed said softly. "I hear Rayburn's riders were on our side of the river last night also."

"What about it?" Kramer snapped.

"I figured," Ed observed, "it was our job to keep them on their side, too."

"You'll figure so much," Kramer said grimly, "that you'll end up with a chest full of lead."

"Not your lead, Buck," Ed smiled. "Remember that." He went into the bunkhouse, and when he came out ten minutes later Wing said to him.

"Miss Kimbrough wants to see you, kid."

Ed lifted his eyebrows and then glanced toward the house. "Kramer telling tales?" he asked the little puncher.

"Ask her," Wing said.

Ed went into the house, hat in hand. It was tastefully furnished. There was a piano in one corner, bookcases, rich Indian rugs on the floor and on the walls. Their was a painting of Leah Kimbrough's father, a big portrait on one wall. Ed was looking at it when the girl came in. She was very quiet.

"I hear you went across the river last night and scattered Mr. Rayburn's sheep," she said.

Ed McLain twisted the hat. He said, "Reckon you're right, Miss Kimbrough."

"I—I don't want any incidents," Leah Kimbrough said slowly, "that will bring about a shooting match. I don't want to see any of our men killed."

"I'll kill any man," Ed said without emotion, "who tries to kill me."

"No one tried to kill you," the girl pointed out.

Ed smiled patiently. "Rayburn's riders came across the Crow last night and raided Flying K stock. When they do that they hit at me. I ride for Flying K."

Leah Kimbrough regarded him queerly. "You men have your pride," she said. "I didn't know that. However, in the future I'll have to order you to stay on this side of the river."

Ed shrugged, "Your ranch," he said, "but it won't be for long." He went out then, leaving the girl staring after him.

At noon he was down at the corral watching a Flying K rider breaking a little buckskin horse. The buckskin was vicious and the rider was having a time staying on its back.

Buck Kramer came up behind Ed. He said sourly, "You workin' for Flying K?"

"You know what I was hired for," Ed told him coolly. He'd never done any manual labor in between times while working for an employer. None of the other hired gunhands worked on the Flying K. He'd seen them lolling about the ranch, sleeping in the bunkhouse, drinking coffee in the cook's kitchen.

"I'm short-handed," Kramer growled. "I need somebody to ride into Talbot with Miss Kimbrough. She's carryin' a lot o' cash for deposit in the bank. We sold half a hundred head o' stock to Miles Miller, a rancher up on Squaw Creek. He paid cash."

Ed McLain looked at the man, wondering why Kramer had selected him to ride with Miss Kimbrough. It was obviously a weak excuse. Kramer could have assigned any one of half a dozen other Flying K men. A half-hour before, Ed had seen several of the paid gunhands riding east and he knew they'd been headed for Talbot also. Miss Kimbrough could have gone with them.

"All right," Ed said. "I'll saddle up."

He found Miss Kimbrough waiting for him outside the barn. She rode a gray gelding. She said, "I told Kramer it wouldn't be necessary for me to have an escort. He insisted."

Ed only nodded, but his mind was working rapidly. He hadn't been aware of the fact that Kramer, and not Miss Kimbrough, had arranged this little trip to town.

"Reckon I can stand a shave and haircut," he said, "while you're at the bank."

HE RODE a little behind her, and he saw George Wing watching him curiously as he left the ranch. He waved a hand to Wing. Buck Kramer sat on the corral bars, watching the rider on the buckskin horse, but Ed saw him turn his head slightly to look after them. He stared straight ahead.

There was little conversation during the hour ride to Talbot. Ed said once, "How

long you figure on holding Rayburn across the river?"

Leah Kimbrough bit her lips grimly. "My father would have hated to see Flying K range go to sheep. We're staying on our side with guns until Rayburn gets tired and looks for other grazing land."

"That might take a long time," Ed observed.

"I have time," the girl said.

"Not if Rayburn continues to raid your herds," Ed stated. "He'll chew you down till you can't stay in business. When you have no more stock on the range and you can't pay your hired hands, they quit and Rayburn makes his crossing."

"And you'll quit with them," Leah said tersely.

Ed shrugged. "We'll see. I like to see a hand through when I'm in it."

Talbot was a dry, dusty town, skirting the north bank of the Crow. The bank was a two-story building of red brick with iron shutters. There was a single street of stores and saloons. Ponies stood at the racks in front of each saloon, more ponies than Ed had expected to see at this hour of the day. He noted this fact and filed it away in the back of his mind.

The Talbot Hotel was the other two-story structure in Talbot, and it occupied a position directly opposite the bank. There was a porch running around the entire front of the building which stood on a corner. Where the north and the west wings of the porch met at the head of the street, a fat, clumsy man sat, big boots up on the porch railing, a cigar in his mouth. He regarded Ed and the girl with interest.

The fat man was the man Ed had met in the draw the day before. Ed said as they dismounted in front of the bank, "That man on the porch Rayburn?" He jerked his head in the direction of the hotel.

Leah Kimbrough said, "Yes," tersely, and then she looked at Ed. "Don't start any trouble with him," she warned.

Ed smiled. "I came here for a haircut and shave," he pointed out.

The barber was across the road, adjourning the hotel. Ed crossed the road, waiting as a horseman rode in front of him. He had to walk past the spot at which Rayburn was sitting. He gave the fat man a friendly smile.

Rayburn took the cigar from his mouth, looked at it, and said, "So."

Ed grinned at him. He paused and said, "Maybe you should have put that slug through me instead of in front of my pony."

Rayburn nodded. "There's time for that," he said.

"Maybe," Ed told him, "not as much time as you think, Ben."

Rayburn flicked cigar ash from the cigar. He said softly, "My boys are rounding up the sheep you scattered up in the hills last night. It'll take them three days, friend. That wasn't nice."

"News travels fast in this country," Ed observed.

"Fast enough for a cheap drifter like yourself," Rayburn said. "Nobody invited you in to this fight."

"I'm in it," Ed said, grinning, "and I'm happy."

"Think about that," Rayburn told him, "when you're laying out in the road with a slug through your belly."

Ed saw a man step out of the Alhambra saloon diagonally across the street, wiping his lips. He stopped suddenly, stared at Ed, and then turned and walked back into the saloon. Ed McLain's eyes flickered. He walked on towards the barber shop, thinking rapidly. The spot Ben Rayburn had picked commanded a view of the entire town. This could have been more than mere coincidence.

Once before, Ed had been set up in El Paso. He had the same feeling now as he stepped into the empty barber shop and dropped his hat on a peg.

The barber had been standing by the window, and Ed knew he'd been watching the two of them talking at the hotel porch. The barber was a fat-faced man with thin brown hair and a flabby chin. When Ed had settled himself he said,

"Working for Rayburn?"

"Flying K," Ed said casually.

The barber blinked at him as he tied the apron around Ed's neck. He muttered, "New rider?"

"That's right," Ed said. He slipped his sixgun out of the holster underneath the apron, and held it in his hand. The barber turned the chair so that it faced the mirror on the wall. Ed said softly, "Other way, friend. I want to look out at the street."

The barber swallowed audibly and turned the chair. Ed could see the hotel porch from here, and Ben Rayburn's bulky figure sprawled in the wicker chair. He could see the bank and the Alhambra. Between the two buildings was another one-story, false-front affair with a plate glass window in front of it. Ed read the words: Jonas Morrell, Attorney at Law.

Rayburn was smoking his cigar again, his battered black hat tilted on the side of his head, boots up on the railing. Two men came out of the Alhambra, and Ed McLain recognized the type—the thin faces, the nervous twitching of the hands as they lighted cigarettes, their utter inability to fade into the scenery the way they would have liked to.

A third man stood just inside the bat-wing doors, looking out. He flipped his cigarette

over the top of the doors and then blew his nose with a red bandanna handkerchief.

Ben Rayburn, on the porch, calmly turned his head and looked towards the barber shop. He looked away again, no expression on his face, but Ed McLain felt a cold chill go through him.

As the barber started to work on him he watched the three men move into position. One of them dropped down on a barrel just in front of the saloon. The second man crossed the road farther up the street, and Ed knew he was taking up a position, facing the barber shop.

The third man, still inside the Alhambra, disappeared for a moment, and then emerged from the alley to the right of the saloon. He stood at the corner there, rolling a cigarette, watching the barber shop, watching Ben Rayburn under the rim of his hat.

The door of Morrell's office opened and the lawyer came out, locking the door behind him. He crossed the street, a tall man, colorless eyes flicking to either side of the road. He didn't see Ed in the barber shop.

Morrell swung past the porch where Rayburn was sitting, glanced at him, no recognition in his eyes, and kept going. Rayburn didn't even look at the man.

Ed McLain smiled faintly. He relaxed in the chair, knowing that Rayburn's gunhands weren't making a play until he came out on the street. The set-up was apparent from then on. There would be an imaginary insult of some kind, possibly a jostle on the street. Then the guns would roar and he would get his from the rear or from the side. He would get it before he had time to draw his gun and make a fight out of it.

Leah Kimbrough came out of the bank and walked up the street in the direction of the stores. She glanced once toward the barber shop and she saw him through the window.

"She's having her troubles," the barber said. "That Rayburn is tough."

Ed nodded. He said, "Rayburn and Morrell pretty good friends?"

The barber stared at him. "They don't know each other," he said. "I suppose Morrell is aware of that fact that Ben Rayburn is trying to take over Flying K range."

"Rayburn in town very often?" Ed asked next.

The barber shook his head. "First time I saw Ben in two weeks," he admitted.

Ed McLain's eyes flickered. He wondered again how it was that Rayburn and three of his gunhands happened to be in town the one afternoon Kramer asked Ed McLain to escort Miss Kimbrough to Talbot.

"How does this town take the fight?" Ed asked curiously. In other towns it had always been the cattlemen who were most popular in

their stand-off fights to keep sheep out of the country.

The barber said evenly, "Rayburn's tough, mister."

Ed smiled. The barber hadn't said much, but it spoke volumes. The peaceful townspeople, who wanted no part of the fight, undoubtedly were with Leah Kimbrough and the Flying K, but Ben Rayburn was very tough. They looked the other way.

When the barber finally took off the apron and shook it out, Ed said, "Can I get a bath?"

"Hot water's on the stove," the barber said. "I'll bring it in." He nodded toward a door in the rear of the shop.

Ed stretched himself and then walked into the smaller room in the rear. He found the tin tub, a couple of buckets of water, a chair and a lot of old newspapers and magazines. He sat down in the chair and picked up a newspaper.

In ten minutes the barber came in with a bucket of hot water and poured it into the tub. Ed didn't move from the chair. He watched the steam ascending toward the ceiling.

Chapter III

GUNMAN'S PAYOFF

THERE was one small window, hooked from the inside, which opened on the rear of the barber shop. Ed studied this window carefully, noting its height from the ground. When the barber went out he hooked the door from the inside. The hook was not very strong.

He sat down again in the chair and scanned the newspaper curiously, making no attempt to undress. He pushed his chair closer to the door and when he heard a step on the wooden floor outside, and the barber's greeting, he applied his eye to the keyhole.

Three customers came in during the passage of one hour, and several times Ed saw the barber look toward the bath door, a frown on his face. Another half-hour passed. Once Ed got up and stretched, walked around the room a few times and then sat down on the chair again. Outside on the street he could imagine Rayburn's three gun hands waiting for him to come out, getting more jumpy every moment. He remembered that Leah Kimbrough was waiting for him also, wondering what had happened. He hoped she would start home by herself.

It was quarter to four, with the barber shop empty, when the Rayburn man who had been sitting on the barrel in front of the Alhambra came through the door. He was a narrow-faced man with deep-sunk, watery blue eyes and a nervous habit of licking his lips.

He didn't speak to the barber, but Ed saw

him slip the sixgun out of the holster, and with it motion the white-faced barber to one side. Ed took his gun out and stood up on the chair which he'd placed to one side of the door. He flattened himself against the wall and waited.

A floor-board creaked near the door, and then the door shot suddenly open as the gunman's boot-tip collided with it. The thin-faced man came in a moment later, gun in hand, lips drawn back in a snarl.

Ed McLain slapped the barrel of his sixgun against the man's skull, and then caught him with his left hand as the man started to sag. He came off the chair and lowered the unconscious fighter to the floor. Picking up the gun which the man had dropped, he tossed it into one of the water buckets.

He called softly to the barber, "Stay where you are, friend." Then he opened the little window and climbed through, dropping to the ground. A woman was hanging out wash on a line in the rear of one of the houses. She stared at him as he came through the window.

Ed McLain brushed himself off, tipped his hat gravely, and headed down along the path behind the line of houses on the main street. He turned down an alley which opened on the main street, and approaching the corner, he walked quietly, his right hand on the butt of the gun.

A man passed the front of the alley, but didn't look down. Ed saw the shadow of another man—a long, thin shadow falling across the head of the alley. The man was looking up the street toward the barber shop, body tense, elbows hooked. He was standing on the edge of the walk near one of the wooden awning uprights, and the late afternoon sun flashed in under the awning, falling full upon him.

Ed glanced quickly up and down the street. There were more people in town now, but none of them were nearby. He said tersely,

"Drop that gunbelt and don't turn around."

The man at the corner stiffened, and the fingers of his gun-hand started to twitch. He didn't look around. Ed McLain said softly,

"Ever get a piece of lead in the small of your back, friend?"

The man's hands went up then toward the buckle of the belt, and a moment later it dropped to the walk. Ed came around, jammed his gun in the man's back, and with his boot-tip jerked the gunbelt to the rear.

He slipped the gun back into the holster then, grabbed his man by the shoulder with his left hand, spun him around and hit him full on the jaw with the right.

The man's hat fell off as he plunged backward into an open door. He had pale, bleached hair and his face was freckled. There was no life in his eyes when he hit the floor of the saddlemaker's shop.

ED SCOOPED up the gunbelt and walked swiftly up the street, picking out the third man at the next corner, diagonally across the street, and directly opposite the hotel porch. The porch was empty now, but the chair in which Ben Rayburn had been sitting was in the same spot.

Without looking, Ed tossed the gunbelt through the open door of the barber shop and kept going across the road directly toward the man who was lounging against the wall of a building. The action had been so swift up the street that he hadn't even noticed that his partner was out of the fight, but he came away from the wall when he spotted Ed moving toward him, hands swinging at his sides, a small grin on his face.

Ed saw him glance up the street, and then hurriedly toward the porch where Rayburn had been sitting. He was a saw-toothed man, sporting a mustache. His mouth went slack beneath the mustache when Ed came up on the walk less than ten feet away from him. He made one motion to go for his gun and then he started to back away, his nerve breaking. He muttered, "All right, now. All right."

Ed McLain hit him full in the mouth with his open hand. He slapped at him with the other hand then, and followed the man along the wall, cuffing him so that his head bobbed back and forth like a cork.

"Damn it!" the man half-screamed. "I'll kill you!"

Ed knocked him down with his closed fist, the grin never leaving his face. Coming across the street he'd known that the fight was all over. He hadn't given the gunhand time to think things over. The relentless, onward march had taken the nerve from the other man.

Ed stood over him, smiling. He said, "You want to use that gun, kid?" He heard Leah Kimbrough say behind him, angrily,

"That wasn't necessary."

Ed McLain came around slowly. He said, "Maybe I should let him shoot me down. This chap's a Rayburn hand."

"Of course," the girl snapped, "you're sure he was going to shoot you down."

"Quite sure," Ed said mildly.

Leah Kimbrough stared at him for a moment in silence, closed her eyes briefly, and then walked steadily towards her horse, still tied outside the bank.

Ed watched her go, jaw tightening, telling himself he should throw up the whole business and push out. The Rayburn man on the ground was saying bitterly,

"I'll get you for this, friend. I'll get you—"

"Shut up," Ed said savagely. "I'll kick your damned brains in." He bent down, ripped the man's gun from the holster, and tossed it up on a shed roof. He went across the street

then and moved slowly up the hotel steps.

Several men were standing in front of the door, and they gave way quickly when they saw the ugly look on his face. He went into the hotel bar just off the dining room, and he found Ben Rayburn at the end of the bar, drinking alone. The big room was nearly empty.

The fat man saw him coming in and he turned, lifting a glass to his lips. Ed walked straight up to the man and slapped at the glass, knocking it from Rayburn's fingers, spilling the liquor across the fat man's coat front. He said tensely,

"You sent three of your dirty killers after me, Rayburn. You want to try it yourself now?"

Ben Rayburn stared at him in amazement, wide-mouthed that any man would have the temerity to do such a thing to him. He said slowly, "You're tough, friend."

"I'll get tougher," Ed told him. "You might just as well make your play now, Ben." "No," Rayburn shook his head slowly. "There's plenty of time for saddlebums like you."

Ed McLain laughed at him disdainfully. He turned his back on the fat man and walked out through the door. On the porch he saw Leah Kimbrough riding down the main street at the other end of town. She had not waited for him.

He stared after the girl grimly. He was walking toward his own horse when he noticed that the office of Jonas Morrell was open. Walking past the tie rack, he went up on the boardwalk and through the door.

The lawyer sat behind his desk, his coat off. He looked steadily at Ed when the tall man pulled up in front of him. He said softly, "Have a seat."

Ed watched him distastefully, hands hooked in his gunbelt. He said, "You know me, Morrell?"

Jonas Morrell shrugged. He picked up a pencil and looked at it. He said, "You're a new hand at Flying K."

Ed watched him for a few moments in silence, listening to the clock tick on the wall. Morrell said abruptly, "What can I do for you? This is a business office."

Ed grinned at him coldly. He said softly, "Reckon you can tell me why one man meets another down in a draw where no one can see them, and then doesn't know that man when they meet in town."

JONAS MORRELL had been drumming on the table with a pencil. He stopped abruptly and his colorless eyes narrowed. Ed McLain thought he saw the sweat breaking out on the man's forehead.

"What do you want in this country?" Mor-

rell asked slowly. His eyes drilled into McLain. "What does any man want?" Ed countered. He added slyly, "Especially a man with good ears and good eyes."

Morrell leaned back in the chair, smiling. He said, "All right, so you know I had a talk with Ben Rayburn out on the plains. What about it?"

"How would that strike Miss Kimbrough?" Ed asked him. "What about that?"

Jonas Morrell pursed his lips. "How much do you want?"

"I don't know," Ed McLain said. "Maybe I'm just curious. Maybe I just want to see how things work out."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Morrell smiled. "It won't kill me," Ed assured him. "I'll be around a long time."

"I'll pay you five hundred dollars to leave this part of the country," Jonas Morrell said, "and I'm a fool to do it."

"Maybe," Ed observed, "I'm a fool to turn it down, but I am." He left the office with the lawyer staring after him thoughtfully. He rode back to the Flying K alone, and he found George Wing in the barn going over some harnessing. He said to Wing, "What does Jonas Morrell want most in this world?"

Wing grinned and rubbed his chin. He said, "Reckon he'd like to be a state senator."

Ed lifted his eyebrows. "Politics?" he asked.

Wing nodded. "Morrell's a big fish in a small pond and he wants to get out o' this pond. Once he gets his start he'll go a long way. He's shrewd."

"Why doesn't he start?" Ed wanted to know.

Wing shrugged. "You see how big Talbot is," he observed. "How many payin' clients does a man get in a year in Talbot?"

Ed nodded. "So Jonas needs money," he said softly.

"You see damn few men in this country git up to the top without it," Wing smiled. "They need backin'. If not their own money, then somebody else's."

Ed saw a shadow fall across the floor, and looking up he saw Buck Kramer's solid frame in the doorway. Kramer was watching him grimly.

"Surprised to see me back?" Ed said.

Kramer spat. "Why in hell should I be surprised to see you back?" he countered.

"You figure that one out," Ed said. He knew that Kramer had undoubtedly spoken to Leah Kimbrough when the girl rode in ten minutes before. Kramer had gotten the news from Talbot.

"Hear you had it out with some o' Rayburn's boys," Kramer said. "You'll stick your neck out once too often."

"I won't have it in the ground," Ed grinned,

"when the guns start to pop, I know that." Buck Kramer gave him a long look. He said grimly, "You boys will take the No. 8 shack tonight."

When he turned to go, Ed called after him casually, "Anybody tries to set me up twice in a row, Buck, I'm coming after him."

Kramer stopped. He swung around slowly. "You're as crazy as all hell," he said.

"Remember it," Ed told him.

When Kramer left, George Wing said, "Somebody set you up in Talbot this afternoon?"

"Rayburn," Ed admitted, "and others."

"It'll happen again," Wing warned, "and damned quick."

Ed McLain nodded. He'd been aware of that when he'd spoken to Jonas Morrell; he'd intentionally prodded the lawyer so that the action would come quickly. By now, McLain had unraveled the plot Morrell and Ben Rayburn were setting up.

Morrell needed money, and Ben Rayburn apparently had it. Rayburn's sheep were no good unless he could get them across the Crow. His huge flock of woollies was eating up the scant grass on the west side of the Crow, and they'd need new grazing land very shortly.

Leah Kimbrough's stubbornness in hiring professional gunhands had stymied Rayburn for the time being. The big sheep owner had made a deal with Morrell of some kind, and Ed could only guess at its implications. If the girl married Morrell, the lawyer could arrange to turn the Flying K grazing land over to Rayburn for a price. This money, along with the still valuable Flying K, would be the springboard from which Jonas Morrell would take his plunge into politics.

Possibly Morrell had also been assured of Ben Rayburn's backing after the sheepman took over the whole bench. With Flying K's bulwark down, Rayburn would flood the land with sheep, driving every cattleman out of the country. In time Rayburn would be the biggest man in the state, and his support to a political candidate would mean something.

Buck Kramer, Ed had no doubt, had been brought in by Morrell, and Kramer was working with Rayburn, deliberately permitting Rayburn's toughs to cross the river and raid Flying K stock in an attempt to discourage Miss Kimbrough. Kramer had arranged the deal with Ben Rayburn wherein Ed McLain was to be shot down in the streets of Talbot.

Morrell had to act fast now, knowing that the new Flying K gunhand was on to him, and not sure what the man would do. Ed's refusal to accept money could mean two things to Morrell. Either he wanted more than Morrell had offered, or he was getting ready to spill the whole plan to Leah Kimbrough.

Sitting inside the Flying K barn, Ed McLain tried to figure Morrell's next move. George Wing watched him curiously while he worked on the harnessing, softening the leather with oil. Wing said finally, "Reckon you know more about this business than you're sayin', friend."

Ed smiled at him. He crossed to the bunkhouse and lay down for two hours, the thought back in his mind that he wouldn't be getting much sleep that night.

It was six o'clock when he got up and walked to the door. He saw Morrell's chestnut horse tied near the corral. He went back to the table in the bunkhouse and played solitaire until supper time. Only four men ate in the bunkhouse that night. Buck Kramer was not with them.

George Wing looked at Ed and shook his head soberly. He didn't say anything until they had stepped out into the shadows after supper. Wing was smoking a cigar, the tip of it glowing in the darkness.

"What's up?" Wing asked.

"I don't see any of Miss Kimbrough's gun hands," Ed observed.

"They could be out at the shacks already," Wing said. "Maybe Kramer's figurin' on a quick crossin' tonight an' he's gettin' ready."

"Maybe," Ed agreed.

He heard Leah Kimbrough calling from the house—calling for Wing. The puncher walked away and Ed smoked his cigarette through. He saddled the sorrel and he waited for Wing to come back. He saw Wing moving around near the carriage house, moving in and out of the lantern light.

IT WAS nearly seven o'clock when Wing came over, ready to ride out to the No. 8 shack.

Ed said casually, "Hell of a lot of excitement around here tonight."

Wing grumbled something that was unintelligible. They rode past the corral, and Ed glanced back at the lighted ranch house, a frown on his face. Jonas Morrell's chestnut horse was still tied near the corral.

"So he's staying for supper," Ed observed.

Wing didn't say anything until they were some distance up along the river.

"You want to know? She's marryin' him tonight."

Ed pulled up the sorrel immediately. He stared at Wing for some time in silence.

"She told me," Wing scowled, "but nobody else. I'm an old Flyin' K hand an' I worked fer her father. She asked me to git the buckboard ready. They're ridin' up to Junction City right after the weddin'."

"Tonight," Ed said slowly.

"She sent one o' the boys to ask Parson Edwards to run down from Talbot," Wing

went on. "The parson will be here about eight o'clock."

Ed McLain took a long breath. He said, "The parson live in the building next to the church in town?" He'd noticed the church when he first rode into Talbot. It was a small white building just off the main street at the north end of town.

"Reckon that's it," Wing said queerly. "Why?"

"You ride on to the shack," Ed told him. "I'll be along later." He turned the sorrel and headed east, Wing staring after him. In five minutes he was on the Talbot road, and in another twenty minutes moving down the main street.

He dismounted outside the parsonage and rapped on the door, hat in hand. The door was opened by a white-haired old man who was just struggling into a stiff collar.

"The Reverend Edwards?" Ed asked.

"That's right." The minister nodded.

"I'm from the Flying K," Ed told him. "Miss Kimbrough asked me to tell you they're going up to Junction City for the marriage. You're to meet them at the Sherman Hotel."

"Junction City?" Parson Edwards murmured. "Why I won't be able to get there before ten o'clock this evening."

Ed McLain scratched his chin dubiously. "Reckon she didn't say anything about the time of the wedding," he said.

The minister brightened up. "I'll arrange to stay in Junction tonight," he stated, "and ride back tomorrow morning."

Ed rode off, heading back for the Flying K. He let the sorrel run this time, and when he raised the lights of the ranch house, he turned north along the Crow, heading for the No. 8 shack.

George Wing had a fire going and his gun out when Ed came up to the shack. He slid away the gun.

"What in hell you been doin'?"

"Bucking Cupid," Ed grinned. He dropped from the saddle and walked to the shack. "Any excitement?" he asked.

"I'm thinkin' there'll be plenty o' hell along the Crow tonight," Wing said. "Too damned quiet." He added significantly, "I passed the No. 7 shack on the way up here. It's empty."

Ed McLain spun around. "Empty?" he gasped. "What about the other shacks?"

Wing shook his head. "I figured Kramer must o' doubled the guard down the river an' took the boys out o' No. 7."

Ed ran for the sorrel. "We'll have a look at the other shacks."

"We leavin' No. 8?" Wing asked, surprised.

"We can get back in an hour if we have to," Ed told him grimly. "This is more important."

They moved away from the shack, leaving the fire outside still burning. Ed stared across the Crow. The night was dark and there was the smell of rain in the air. It had not rained for months and the range grass had been turning brown.

Wing said quietly, "We'll be gettin' it tonight, an' that'll give Ben Rayburn a chance to run his damned woollies over. It'll be too dark to see 'em comin'."

Ed sent the sorrel down along the river and he listened to the song of the wind through the willows. The No. 7 shack was a mile and a half downstream. There was no light, no fire. Ed kicked on the door with his boot tip, but didn't dismount.

When there was no answer, he sent the sorrel at a fast trot in the direction of the next shack. He'd been told that Leah Kimbrough had had these huts erected hastily when Rayburn's sheep appeared on the horizon. They were small, accommodating two men, the cooking was done outside on the ground.

The No. 6 shack was also empty. George Wing scratched his head.

"What in hell is Kramer doin'?" he asked.

"We'll find out," Ed McLain told him. They went down along the river, finding shack after shack empty. Even at the fording place, the most likely spot for Rayburn's crossing, the No. 3 shack had been abandoned.

"Hell," Wing said slowly, "Miss Kimbrough don't know nothin' about this. She told me tonight to keep the boys along the river. Buck Kramer's actin' on his own takin' 'em all off."

"None of the men were at the bunkhouse tonight," Ed said slowly. "That means Kramer took them off late this afternoon."

"Where are they?" Wing wanted to know.

"Kramer paid them off," Ed said, "and sent them out of the country. It meant that Rayburn's making his crossing tonight."

"Buck Kramer!" Wing said softly.

"He's on Rayburn's payroll," Ed told the man. "He's left the river open for Ben. How many men does Miss Kimbrough have with the stock?"

Wing thought for a moment. "We had eight hands before she started bringin' in the hard-cases. One boy quit, an' that leaves seven. Reckon most of 'em will be with the herd tonight."

"Bring them all up to the river," Ed ordered. "Tell them to run up a couple of hundred head of cattle with them. Hold the stock in the brush near the No. 3 shack."

George Wing licked his lips. He said thoughtfully, "You takin' over?"

"Any objections?" Ed wanted to know.

Wing grinned. "Reckon I'm with anybody fights Rayburn," he said. "I'll have the boys along the river in an hour. What about

you? What in hell you going to pull off?"

Ed McLain smiled grimly. "Kramer left the whole river open, but he gave us orders to stay at the No. 8 shack. I'm wondering why."

"Kramer don't have much use fer you," Wing stated, "an' neither does Ben Rayburn. They'll raid that shack before they run the woollies over."

"Somebody should be there," Ed said, "to welcome Rayburn's boys." He turned the sorrel. "I'll be down at the No. 3 shack when you get back."

"They'll make a damned sieve out o' you," Wing warned.

Ed laughed. He felt the first drops of warm rain when he started upriver again. He could hear it pattering into the dust, falling in the river. It felt good on his shoulders as it penetrated the shirt. When it began to fall in earnest he took the slicker from the roll behind the saddle, slipped into it, and buttoned it around his neck. The water dripped from the rim of his hat as he rode along.

Chapter IV

DEATH TO THE RIVER RAIDERS!

ED FIGURED the time to be nearly ten o'clock when he stopped the sorrel several hundred yards south of the shack. He wondered how long Jonas Morrell would wait at the Flying K ranch house before suspecting that something had gone wrong somewhere. They might attribute the minister's tardiness to the rain.

Slipping a Winchester rifle from the saddle holster, Ed started up along the river on foot. He listened for sounds in the night, but could hear nothing but the patter of the rain all around him. He slipped among the willows along the shore, keeping the Winchester under the slicker so that it wouldn't get wet.

He was within fifty yards of the No. 8 shack when he saw the dark shape moving ahead of him. The little fire in front of the hut had sizzled out long ago in the rain, but Ed could make out the dim shape of the shack backed up against the trees about twenty-five yards up from the river.

The man up ahead of him was creeping toward the shack, his slicker shiny with rain. Ed went after him, dropping the Winchester, and sliding his sixgun from the holster. When the man ahead of him dropped behind a clump of brush and peered toward the shack, Ed kept coming, stepping lightly, the sound of falling rain blotting out the footsteps.

He was within six feet of the man behind the brush when his boot struck an upturned ledge of rock. The man was coming around, and Ed caught a brief glimpse of his white face just before he crashed the barrel of the

sixgun over the man's head. The blow was hard.

The Rayburn man pitched forward into the brush and Ed fell on top of him, his left hand feeling for the gun. He heard a man say sharply from his left, "What in hell was that?"

It was the voice of Buck Kramer. Ed muffled his voice as best he could, hoping it would get by. He mumbled, "Tripped over a damned rock."

There was a moment of silence and then Kramer said tersely, "Get in closer. They might have seen us comin' up an' be waitin' inside till we come out in the open."

Ed McLain relaxed on the ground. Taking the gun from the unconscious man's limp hand, he stuck it in his belt and started to crawl forward again. He saw Buck Kramer move from one bush to another, and then he spotted another man up closer to the shack.

Ben Rayburn's voice suddenly snapped out, "Give 'em hell."

A fusillade of shots pierced the flimsy shack, and then a second volley.

"In on 'em!" Rayburn yelled, and Ed tore in with the others. He saw a man kick in the door and empty his sixgun into the shack. Somebody was saying sourly, "Reckon they skipped out, Ben."

Ed joined the group in front of the shack. He counted five men, all of them in slickers. He had his flat-crowned hat pulled down low over his eyes. He stood a little to the rear and said nothing.

Ben Rayburn had struck a match and gone inside. The match went dead and he came out, a bulky shape in the semi-darkness, looking even bigger in the shining slicker.

"Somebody tipped them off," he said thickly. "We'll head back across the river and run the sheep over anyway. Garvey, you head down on this side of the river. If you run into any Flying K riders, skip across and let us know where they are."

There was a moment of silence, and then Rayburn snapped sharply, "Garvey?"

Ed McLain felt the sweat break out on his face. Buck Kramer was less than a yard away from him on his left, and Kramer was close enough to recognize his voice if he spoke now. He was positive the man he'd knocked down in the brush was Garvey.

No one answered Rayburn, and the big man said softly, "We'll have a light here, Kramer."

Buck Kramer swore, and then a match flared up in the rain. Gripping the sixgun, Ed lunged for Kramer, pushing with the gun and his free hand. He knocked the Flying K foreman off his feet, sending him into two other men.

He started to run then, zig-zagging, running in the general direction of the river. A gun roared behind him, and then another. One bullet tugged at the slicker, the other

one went wild. They continued to fire. Ed hit the river, running into it at full speed, splashing knee-deep for several steps. He heard a man yell, "He's goin' in the water."

Then he came out again, running low along the bank. He took a long, low dive forward on his face and started to crawl forward. He heard Ben Rayburn roar, "Bring a light up here. Bring a light!"

They were shooting wildly at shadows in the river as Ed crawled rapidly away through the darkness. Someone ran down to the river's edge with a flaming torch of old newspapers they'd found in the shack.

ED McLAIN saw the light as he gathered up the reins of the sorrel, climbed into the saddle, and walked the horse downriver. He took a deep breath then, realizing his actions had been on the foolhardy side. He'd hoped to learn, by association with Rayburn's men, the exact spot where the sheep would be crossed, Rayburn's coincidental order to the man Ed had knocked down threw this plan out of kilter. They would have to guess where Rayburn would cross, and hope he would take the easy ford near the No. 3 shack.

Half an hour later, Ed found George Wing and the Flying K riders waiting back along the river behind the No. 3 shack. Wing saw him coming up in the rain and he shouted, "Hey—Smith!"

Ed swung in. He heard cattle moving somewhere behind Wing. Another rider was with Wing.

"You all right?" Wing asked solicitously. "We heard them shots up the river an' we figured you was ready for buryin'."

"They riddled our shack," Ed laughed. "I wasn't in it at the time. How many head do you have here?"

The man with Wing said grimly, "We brought up three hundred head. Where in hell is Buck Kramer?"

"He was with Rayburn last time I saw him," Ed said evenly. "That make sense?"

Several other Flying K men were coming up out of the night, their horses sloshing in the mud.

George Wing said quietly, "Reckon Kramer's gone 'sheep', boys. This hombre's takin' over an' we figure on stoppin' Rayburn's move tonight. Kramer pulled all the gunnies away from the river, leavin' it open."

There were several moments of silence, and then a man spoke up from the rear, "What about this cattle?"

"I want to know where Rayburn intends to make his crossing," Ed explained. "When we see the sheep going into the river we drive this stock out to block them off. We'll have to fight off Rayburn's toughs if he sends them

across. It'll be a hell of a tough deal."

"What about Miss Kimbrough?" another man wanted to know.

George Wing answered this. "Reckon Miss Kimbrough don't want them sheep on Flyin' K range," he said. "She's kind o' busy gettin' married tonight. We'll tell her about it in the mornin'." He said softly to Ed, "Or is she gettin' married tonight?"

"I wouldn't know," Ed told him innocently. He gave the order for the men to spread up and down the river and indicate with a shot where Rayburn was coming over. He stayed with Wing in the vicinity of the No. 3 shack.

It was still raining, coming down steadily, drenching the earth, running in tiny rivulets into the Crow. Ed sat astride the sorrel and stared across the river. Vaguely, he could make out the other bank and the line of trees along the shore.

Wing said briefly, "Ben's got his whole fortune tied up in them sheep. He's got to get 'em across tonight 'cause the little grass on the other side is about gone."

Ed nodded. "It'll be a fight," he admitted. "How deep is the river along here?"

"Maybe a foot," Wing told him. "Sheep kin walk right across if you let 'em."

Ed McLain glanced at his watch. It was past eleven o'clock now. He rode up the river and passed one of the Flying K watchers. The puncher stared at him under the brim of his dripping hat, but didn't say anything. Two hundred yards up from the No. 3 shack another man was watching the dark water, and then Ed heard the faint bleating and the mingled sounds in the distance. The puncher said, "Comin' up now." He spat into the water.

"You want us to bring them cattle up, mister?"

"We'll wait," Ed advised, "until Rayburn has his sheep in the water. He'll have some point riders up ahead of his flock. If they see the cattle they'll hold up the sheep and make an attempt farther downstream."

He gave orders for Wing to get his riders behind the cattle and hold them in readiness. He pulled his own horse back in among the willows and waited as the sounds increased across the river. He held the sixgun under the slicker and he rubbed the blue barrel with his fingertips.

A horse went into the water directly across the river. He could hear the animal splashing, and then he saw the wave of murky white moving down the sloping banks.

Two riders were crossing ahead of the flock, and Ed picked them out in the darkness as they emerged from the river, moving straight toward him. An unending line of white moved down into the water, spreading out, hesitant before making the crossing.

One of the point riders passed within a

dozen yards of Ed as he sat among the willows, the sorrel motionless. The bleating of the sheep filled the night now, and Ed was sure even Leah Kimbrough could hear it several miles away at the ranch house.

Shouting, cursing men were working on the other side, trying to get the sheep into the water. They were spreading farther and farther along the banks on either side, and then a narrow wedge began to move out into midstream. Others followed, and then the entire wave moved.

Ed McLain lifted his sixgun and fired once into the air. He heard a whoop down near the No. 3 shack and he jumped the sorrel out of the willows just as one of Rayburn's point riders sent a hurried shot toward the spot.

Ed picked out the man twenty yards away. He shot at the flash of the man's gun and he saw a horse dash away with the rider slumped in the saddle. Behind him he heard the whooping and the firing as the Flying K riders got the herd moving.

The second point rider who had gone north to explore the shore came dashing back now, shouting across the river. He was still standing there when the Flying K stock pounded out of the brush, heading straight for the water.

ED HAD backed away to avoid the frightened cattle. He saw the Rayburn man fire his gun rapidly to turn the stock, but others came on in the rear, charging blindly through the rain. The point rider frantically headed out into the water and Ed tried to shout the warning to him, but it was too late. His horse could not move fast enough in the foot-deep stream and the Flying K steers hit him from all directions.

There was a wild, frightened scream as horse and rider went down under driving hoofs. The three hundred cattle hit the water with a terrific rush, Flying K riders moving behind them, spurring them on. They tore in among the sheep out in midstream, piling them up in the water.

The sheep behind the first wave were still moving down the banks toward the water, moving blindly, those in the rear pushing up, creating a terrific jam.

Ed spotted George Wing coming up, slapping his hat at a few cattle straggling into the water. He yelled at Wing, "Take five of the boys up to the end of the line. Rayburn will try to cross now and break us up."

Wing shouted, picked up his men and spurred away in the rain. Ed took the remaining men, dismounted them fifty yards downstream where the line of sheep had thinned out, and waited.

A half-dozen woollies had managed to edge around the wildly threshing cattle out in the

river. They came up the banks and chased away into the brush. Ed let them go. He gripped his sixgun and waited.

The bleating of the sheep and the bellowing of the cattle filled the night. Some of Rayburn's men had pushed down among the sheep and were shooting wildly at the Flying K stock, now hopelessly entangled in the massed wall of sheep.

A man was shouting from the other bank, and then Ed saw the line of horsemen coming across the river. They spread out when they reached mid-stream. Ed stood up.

"Stay on your side, Rayburn," he yelled.

A slug whined over his head, and then the Flying K punchers opened up. Two men slipped from their saddles and fell into the water. A half-dozen others kept coming, driving up out of the water.

Ed McLain dropped one man. The Flying K men had retreated in among the willows and were firing steadily, their guns flashing orange in the falling rain.

Four more Rayburn men followed the first group, dropping to the ground when they hit the east bank of the river, crawling up toward the few Flying K men firing from the brush.

Crouching behind a tree, Ed unloaded his gun and then reloaded it again. A hoarse-voiced man yelled, "Split up. We'll get behind 'em."

It was the voice of Buck Kramer. Ed spotted the blocky man running directly toward his tree. He was hatless, his wide face streaming water, black hair plastered to his head.

Ed yelled suddenly, "Morrell, they're coming this way!"

Kramer pulled up and Ed dropped to the ground. Kramer's gun roared twice, and Ed fired at the flashes. He heard the sharp intake of Kramer's breath as the man dropped, and then he heard Kramer crawling painfully away.

The Rayburn men were still trying to work their way closer to the willows when George Wing's party roared down from the other end of the line, firing as they came.

Again Ed McLain roared, "Come on, Morrell!"

Rayburn's toughs broke ground and raced into the river on foot. Ed could hear them splashing all the way across the shallow fording place. George Wing threw himself out of the saddle near Ed. He yelled excitedly, "Jonas Morrell down here with us?"

Ed smiled. "You see him?" he asked.

"Somebody was yellin' his name," Wing muttered.

"Could have been the wind," Ed said. More sheep were coming up the banks now, scattered groups, and the Flying K riders spread out to chase them back into the river. The push had stopped over on the other bank, and

the woollies were moving downstream, avoiding the water now.

For the next half-hour Ed kept the Flying K men busy riding up and down along the river's edge, driving sheep back into the water. George Wing said once,

"Rayburn's come across with his boys?"

"He's too smart for that," Ed said. "He was paying men for that dirty job."

When the last of Rayburn's flock was driven back into the Crow, Ed said to Wing, "Keep the boys down here in case they make another attempt. I'm heading back for the ranch."

"They're licked," Wing grinned, "an' Rayburn knows it."

ED McLAIN thought that over as he sent the sorrel at a fast trot in the direction of the Flying K ranch house. The rain was slowing down now.

He pulled up near the bunkhouse and listened to the water dripping from the roof. The moon was trying to break through a rift in the clouds. He saw a horse tied near the corral, and then a shadow moved across the porch.

Silently, Ed drifted in the direction, of the porch, coming up behind the corral. He heard a sharp rapping on the door, and then a patch of yellow light fell across the hulking shape of Ben Rayburn standing just outside.

The man in the doorway was Jonas Morrell. Rayburn made no attempt to go in. His elbows were tight at his sides, his back toward Ed, and from the position of the man Ed knew he held a gun in his hand.

Rayburn's husky voice reached Ed very clearly. Rayburn was saying evenly, "That was a cheap lawyer's trick, Morrell—a very neat double-cross."

Jonas Morrell's perplexed, "What?" was very weak.

"So you married into Flying K," Rayburn said tersely, "and you thought you'd break me and get every rancher in the county solidly behind you for stopping a sheepman."

Leah Kimbrough called from the interior of the house, "Who is that, Jonas?"

Ed McLain didn't know whether the girl heard Ben Rayburn's next statement. Rayburn spoke softly, the words distinct to Ed.

"Reckon this is the old man with the scythe; ma'am, making you a widow."

A sound was jerked from Morrell's throat. It was not a word; it was a kind of protest lost in the roar of Rayburn's sixgun. Ben Rayburn fired twice.

Ed McLain saw Morrell double up and fall forward, clutching at his stomach. His forehead hit the porch floor inches from Rayburn's feet. Ed walked up quietly until he

was within fifteen feet of Rayburn. He said softly, "All right, Ben. Finish it up."

He dropped to his knees then, surprised at the big man's incredible speed. Rayburn came around like a huge cat, his sixgun spitting flame.

Ed fired once and he saw Rayburn's head jerk back as if someone had thrown a rope around his neck and yanked at him. The head came forward again, and then Ben Rayburn reached forward for the porch pillar on the right side of the steps.

He missed the pillar by a full foot and he plunged off the porch, landing in the mud with a splash.

Ed McLain mechanically ejected the spent shell from the gun. He was still standing there, looking at Rayburn, at Morrell huddled on the porch floor, when Leah Kimbrough appeared in the doorway, the light of the lamps inside shining through her copper-colored hair. She did not say anything, but she started to sway, and Ed ran to catch her.

Bright morning sunlight came through the rain-streaked windows of the Flying K living room as Ed McLain sat on the couch near the piano, hat in hands, twirling it aimlessly.

Doc Forbes, from Talbot, came out of a room nearby and nodded. He said, "You can go in and talk to her now."

Ed found Leah Kimbrough sitting up in the bed, face pale and drawn. She tried to smile at him, but it failed. She said quietly, "I'll listen to your story now."

Ed started from the beginning with the interruption of Morrell's visit with Ben Rayburn in the gulch. He told her of Morrell's attempt to buy him off in the office, and then of the fight down at the river.

When he finished Leah Kimbrough said quietly, "I suspected something last night. We heard shots in the distance and I wanted to go down. Jonas insisted that we stay and wait for the minister."

"He never showed up," Ed said solicitously.

"No," the girl said. "She looked at him closely, but Ed's blank face revealed nothing."

"The boys found Buck Kramer's body on the other side of the river," Ed told her. "He managed to get across."

Leah Kimbrough said, "I'll be needing a new foreman, Mr. Smith."

"The name," Ed said, "is McLain, and I'm looking for an honest job."

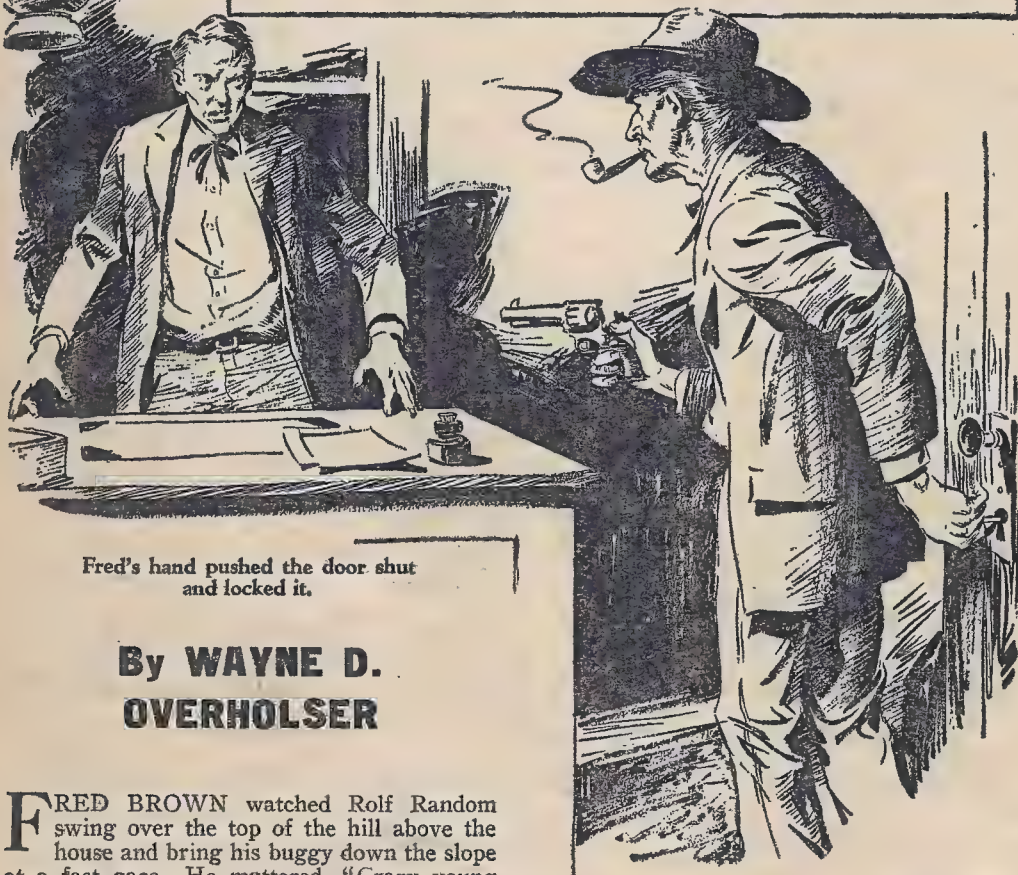
The girl stared at him thoughtfully for some time. She said then, "I'm glad of that, Mr. McLain, for your sake."

Ed got up to go. He said quietly, "Reckon I'll start giving orders now. You'll stay in bed for two days."

Leah Kimbrough said, "It—it's a pleasure taking orders from you, Mr. McLain."

THE END

OLD LAWDOGS NEVER DIE



Fred's hand pushed the door shut
and locked it.

By **WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER**

FRED BROWN watched Rolf Random swing over the top of the hill above the house and bring his buggy down the slope at a fast pace. He muttered, "Crazy young fool," and wondered if Nancy had heard.

Funny thing about Rolf and Nancy. She'd had the pick of a dozen eligibles in Rimrock basin, even Deacon Wells' son Arch, and not one had given her heart the least hint of a flip. Then young Rolf showed up, bought the Ashton place, and decided Nancy was for him. Nancy had the same notion about Rolf. She'd taken his diamond the second week she'd known him, and she'd been doing the housework from a cloud bank ever since.

Yet Fred couldn't be sure. It didn't make any difference about himself. He'd miss Nancy all right when she got married next month and moved over the hill to the Ashton place. He'd have to eat his own cooking, which wasn't what you'd call good, but when a man hits

Old Fred Brown had two valued possessions: a silver star for his life's work as a hard-riding lawman, and a walnut-handled Colt .44 with which he aimed to close forever a lying mouth—and blow to hell and sky-high glory his own hard-won reputation!

his middle sixties and has had so many bullets pass through him that his hide looks like a perforated pin cushion, he hasn't many years left. There was nothing Fred wanted now, really, but happiness for Nancy. If Rolf could give it to her, then she had to have him.

Fred hobbled in to the house and stood for a moment in Nancy's doorway. She was sitting before the mirror, giving her black hair a last-minute touch. Fred, watching her, felt pride swell up in him until he was ready to bust. He never could understand how he could have fathered a girl like this daughter of his. Shapely, dark-eyed, Nancy Brown in her new blue print would be the prettiest girl at the dance just as she had been at every dance for the last five years.

"He's coming, Nancy," Fred said.

She turned from the mirror, her red lips flashing him a quick smile. "And he doesn't like to wait. You go out and entertain him, Dad. He can just get over his impatience before I marry him."

"I don't reckon he'll get over it that quick."

Fred didn't move for a moment, the uncertainty of doubt still in him. There was a job he had to do, but he couldn't do it until he was sure, and Rolf Random did go off half-cocked more times than was good for a man. Once he'd knocked Arch Wells colder than a chunk of jerky on Christmas morning, which might be another reason the deacon had started his tongue wagging about Rolf.

"Go on, Dad." Nancy had turned from the mirror. "He's almost to the gate."

"Now, Nancy. . ."

She smiled again, amused at the sudden seriousness in his eyes, and crossed the room to him. She smelled pretty, he thought. Doggone it, she was pretty. If Rolf Random wasn't the man he claimed to be, or if there was any truth to the words deacon had been swinging his tongue over, then—but Fred put the notion out of his head. It would be too late to save Nancy's happiness. Besides, Fred had lived through the days when things like this could be settled by bullets.

He said slowly, his gray eyes locked with her dark ones, "Are you sure Rolf's the man?"

She nodded, suddenly sober. "Awfully sure, Dad. I've read books about girls falling in love and being full of crazy daydreams and all that. I always laughed about it, but now I'm as crazy as any of them. That's exactly the way I feel about Rolf."

"That's fine, honey," Fred said, and hobbling back to the front gate, reached it just as Rolf wheeled into the yard and pulled up with a grand flourish.

"Howdy," Rolf called amiably. "You know, Fred, time's going backwards with you. You're younger than the first time I saw you."

"Been eating bear meat," Fred said. "Ten

pounds a day. Raw." He shook his head. "Sure does things to a man."

"I'll have to try that treatment."

"The way you put Nancy into another world, you don't need any treatment," Fred said dryly.

Rolf grinned. "You think she likes me, Fred?"

"She's sure putting up a good job of play-acting if she don't," Fred grunted.

HE WAS a likeable, fine-looking man, this Rolf Random, dressed up in his store suit and wearing a white shirt. He had his new, pearl-gray Stetson cocked at a rakish angle, and his brown eyes had the light of a thousand devils in them. Nancy might not have an even-tenored life with Rolf Random, but she'd have an interesting one.

"I'll bet you're feeling so frisky you'll be getting that silver star of yours out and polishing it up," Rolf said. "The way I hear it, you killed Indians and rustlers and tough hands of one kind and another for years around here."

"Had quite a time," Fred conceded. Sometimes he thought Rolf poured it on a little thick, but maybe it was just the boy's way. He busied himself filling his pipe, and wondered if Rolf had heard any of the deacon's gossip.

"Gave you a silver star and made you permanent sheriff, emeritus or ex-officio or whatever it is."

"Nope, they just gave me a silver star and pensioned me," Fred said a little sourly. The memory of it still prodded him to a dull-edged anger when he let himself think about it. "I got my left knee jimmied up in that scrap with the Godine outfit, and I wasn't no good after that. Couldn't ride like I used to, so they shoved me over for a younger man. That's the way it goes, Rolf."

If Rolf caught the bitterness in Fred's tone, he gave no sign. He said, "Say, I guess it was a hell of a fight you had with that bunch. Almost wiped 'em out, didn't you?"

"Not quite."

"I hear what's left of the outfit is back operating across the Snake."

Fred looked at Rolf closely now. That was another of the things the deacon had started about Rolf, that he was an undercover man for the Godine bunch, and he'd bought the Ashton place as a hideout for them.

"None of my concern now."

Nancy came floating out of the house then, a rapt, faraway look on her face. Fred had never seen anything like it until she'd started going with Rolf. And Rolf had the same kind of a look. He stepped down and helped Nancy into the buggy. Then for a minute they just looked at each other.

"This here is fall and we'll have some win-

ter in another month or two," Fred said. "Folks are supposed to fall in love in the spring."

They came out of it then, and grinned sheepishly. Rolf climbed in beside Nancy. He said, "Why don't you come with us, Fred? Plenty of room here in the buggy for three of us."

"Why don't you, Dad?" Nancy urged. "You haven't been to town for a long time."

That did it. Fred got busy with his pipe. He was all choked for a moment so he couldn't answer. A grand pair of kids. They really meant what they said. They'd throw away these sacred moments together just to give an old has-been a ride to town so he wouldn't be lonely.

"Aw, you ain't got need of a fifth wheel on that there buggy." Fred walked back to the porch. "You kids go on and have a good time."

"Fred, you might just as well—" Rolf began.

"Let him alone," Nancy cut in. "He's notionate as the weather and as stubborn as a mule."

"Quit insulting me or I'll tan you." Fred waved toward town. "Go on now or you'll miss the first dance."

Fred sat there on the porch until they were out of sight, pulling more fiercely on his pipe than was his habit. Then, when it was empty, he knocked it out against his bootheel, and looked up at the darkening sky. He was not a man to analyze his own emotions, and only lately had his thoughts turned inward. He had married when he was forty, too late to get married if a man wanted to see his grandchildren.

Somewhere off to the south it had rained, and sage was a spice smell in the air. The wind breathed through the poplars above him, and he heard the dry, lifeless whisper of leaves that would soon be dropped. That was the place he had reached: dry and almost lifeless and already dropped as far as Rimrock county went. He had never thought about these things when he'd been the law, when he'd lived with a horse between his legs and the sky for a roof.

It was different now. He couldn't ride very far. His right wrist was too stiff to make a fast draw. He was even getting a little nearsighted. He had a silver star and an income of fifty dollars a month for life. He grinned a little then. Deacon Wells had yelled his head off when the county court gave him that fifty dollars. Said a man who had worked as long as Fred had should have enough saved.

Fred went into the house and took his gun out of his top bureau drawer: a .44 Colt, long-barreled and walnut-handled. He'd never been a fast-draw gunslick, but he'd been a good shot, able to shoot the buffalo off a nickel a good

deal farther than he could even see the nickel now. That wasn't important for this job. What he had to do would take neither a fast draw nor good shooting. He stood for a moment beside his window in the fast-dwindling twilight, checking the action and feeling pleasure in having the gun again in his hand.

He thought about Nancy and Rolf. It wouldn't make any difference with Nancy's decision to marry Rolf next month if she did hear Deacon Wells' gossip. She would rise to his defense and she'd be loyal. She'd be his wife and she'd have his kids and she'd take care of his house and patch his clothes. Sure, she'd do all of that, but Nancy deserved more. She deserved a marriage she could enter without doubt of her man, without mental reservation, and she would not have it if this talk of Deacon Wells' went unchecked.

Slipping the gun into his waistband, Fred pulled on his coat and left the house, walking more rapidly than was his habit these days. He threw gear on his horse, and took the town road.

IT WAS after nine before he rode into Rimrock, and he saw, with considerable relief, that there was still a light in Wells' office. Fred racked his mount, listened a moment to the music that came along the street from the lodge hall, and then buttoning his coat so his gun wouldn't show, stepped into Wells' office. Wells was there talking to a farmer from the upper basin. When he saw Fred, he frowned, and kept on talking to the farmer.

"I don't know why you had to bring this in cash money," Wells said in a fretted tone. "The bank won't be open till nine o'clock in the morning, and my safe isn't big enough to be dependable."

"Carry it on you," the farmer snapped. "Anyway, you know you wouldn't have taken a check, Wells. I sold my wheat in Walla Walla, and I brought the cash money along because I ain't taking no chances on you running a shenanigan on me and crooking me out of my place."

"All right, all right." Wells snapped a rubber band around the roll of bills, and dropped them into his pocket. "I'm just not anxious to have this much cash on me with the Godine bunch in the country."

Fred stood by the door, a gaunt, stoop-shouldered man, his gray mustache hiding the small smile that struck at the corners of his mouth. Deacon Wells had sold real estate and loaned money for a quarter of a century, long enough for people to know his real caliber. Then the smile faded. No matter how thoroughly folks knew Wells, they still passed along his gossip that grew with the telling.

When the farmer had gone, Wells stood up. "It's late, and I was just going home, Brown.

I presume you could come back in the morning?"

"I presume I can't," Fred said, and pushing the door shut, locked it and dropped the key into his pocket.

"Give me that key," Wells said sharply. "Man, are you crazy?"

"Why, sure," Fred grunted. "I'm crazy as a meadowlark whistling a funeral march. Sit down, Deacon. We've got talk to make."

Fred pulled up a chair, and sat down across the desk from Wells. The insurance man glared down at Fred. He was a long-jawed, slim-faced man whose cold, black eyes were set so close together that folks in Rimrock said his pupils could swap eyes without even making him blink.

Reluctantly Wells dropped into a chair, not sure what this was about and showing the uneasiness it aroused in him. "Maybe you'd better explain this unprecedented action," he said sourly.

"All right, Deacon. I was wondering about your boy Arch. He used to be mighty interested in my Nancy, but lately he ain't been coming around."

Fred said it as if he were disappointed. He dribbled tobacco into his pipe, watching Wells from under bushy brows, and he caught the keen interest that rose quickly in Wells.

"You can't blame Arch, Fred," Wells said. "He asked Nancy to marry him, but she put him off. Then she started wearing this stranger Random's ring, and naturally Arch quit trying to see her."

"So that's what happened?" He was very self-effacing, was Fred Brown in that moment as he slipped his tobacco can back into his pocket. "I've been wondering about this Random fellow. Hate to see Nancy marry him if he ain't just what he should be. You know anything about him?"

"Why no, I don't," Wells said guardedly.

Fred leaned forward, his unlighted pipe held in his hand. "Deacon, within the last week five men have stopped at my place to pass on some gossip about Rolf. One of 'em said he'd served time in the Salem pen. Another one had heard he had a wife and six kids in Baker. Three of these fellers claimed he was a member of the Godine gang and had bought the Ashton place so they'd have a handy hide-out." Fred paused, his eyes pinned on Wells' colorless face. "Deacon, every mother's son of them gossiping old male hens said they got their yarns from you."

"It's a lie," Wells squalled. "Now you get out, Brown. You've got no business coming in here and making accusations like that."

Fred's left hand dropped his pipe into his pocket as his right snaked inside his coat and jerked gun, the coat swinging wide. The gun muzzle lined squarely on the third button of

Wells' shirt and stayed there, never wavering.

Wells went slack as if the starch had gone suddenly from him. He said hoarsely, "You know I've got this money, Brown, but I didn't think you'd rob me of it."

"You'll worry about how you're going to sneak your dinero into Hell," Fred said contemptuously. "I don't want the damned stuff. I just want to know what facts there are behind those tales."

"I didn't tell anything of the kind," Wells said doggedly.

"You'll squeeze a penny till you get a war whoop out of the Indian, you'll lie as often as you'll tell the truth, and you'll smash a man's reputation just to get even. Otherwise you ain't so bad. Maybe you're after Rolf because he got Nancy, or maybe because he licked hell out of your kid, but I'm telling you one thing and I want you to get it straight. I ain't one to stand by while you kick Rolf around and maybe wreck Nancy's happiness."

He was a cold, scheming man, was Deacon Wells, in whom the natural milk of human kindness had been strained to a thin, colorless substance. He weighed this situation now, staring at Fred through carefully masked eyes. Slowly fear began to have its way with him, for Fred's weatherbeaten face had become merciless and cold. He blurted, "Brown, you've never liked me, but that's no reason to kill me, is it?"

"I ain't aiming to kill you if you tell the truth and do what I tell you, but you're sure gonna clean this mess up you started. Sometimes I think you're the ma of that boy Arch. You sure act like a woman."

"All right." Breath came in a gusty sweep from Deacon Wells. "I started those stories to bust your girl and Random up. Arch is crazy about Nancy."

"And you want to fix it so your kid gets what he wants." Fred nodded. "I can see that, Deacon, 'cause it's the same way I feel about Nancy. Only thing is she wants Rolf and she's gonna get a man whose name ain't mucked up by a gabbing coyote like you. We're taking a walk over to the dance."

SLOWLY Wells got to his feet, his eyes narrowed, thin lips a long line across his face. "Why are we going to the dance?"

Fred rose and unlocked the door. "You're gonna tell folks what you just told me. I reckon it'll be the quickest way of getting this business straight."

"I won't do it" Wells squealed.

There was a moment of silence, nerve-tight, pregnant silence that Fred let run on, the minutes piling up, until Deacon Wells was close to breaking. Fred said, "You're afraid to die," and pronged back the hammer of his gun, the sound an ominous click riding the

silence. Then Fred added, slowly, "You've seen me kill men because I was sheriff of Rimrock county, and I had to do it. Now you'll do what I told you to, or I'll kill you because I'm Nancy's father, and I'm going to be Rolf's daddy-in-law."

"They'll hang you."

"Now mebbe they will, but I'd as soon have it that way as to let you keep on talking. If you're dead, or if you tell folks how big a liar you are, your tongue will stop wagging about Rolf. It's going to be one way or the other."

Sweat broke in tiny globules through the skin of Deacon Wells' face and made a bright shine in the lamplight. His tongue ran over dry lips. He started to say something, but the words died in his throat. Suddenly he turned, and moved across the room toward the door.

Fred let down the hammer of his gun. He slid it back into his waistband, and with one hand on gun butt, came up to Wells so that he was only a pace behind him. He said, "Don't try to give the high sign to Arch or anybody who might feel like earning one of your dirty dollars. Just go up the stairs to the lodge hall, get everybody's attention, and speak your piece."

Wells nodded. They moved along the walk until they were opposite the lodge hall, and swung sharply towards it. Fred, in whom old habits clung tenaciously, noted the horses in the street, the men on the boardwalk. One was holding the reins, the others were smoking. There was no talking. It wasn't like a bunch of ordinary punchers taking a smoke outside before they came up for a dance. Then Fred, because his mind was full of this other thing, followed Wells up the stairs and into the hall.

There was a crowd, as there always was for these dances. Fred and Wells came in during the middle of a waltz, and they waited beside the door until it was over. A man yelled at Fred, "Your leg must be feeling purty good if you're fixing to get into this stepping."

"Fitter'n a fiddle string," Fred answered.

That was when the four men came in, and Fred saw, in his first quick glance, that it was the Godine bunch. Buck-toothed Jake was in front, his brother Ed behind him, the two who had escaped Fred when he'd fought the gang five years ago.

Jake Godine fired a shot into the ceiling, the three others fanning out so that they could cover the people pressed against the walls. Fred felt Deacon Wells stiffen, and curse softly as if remembering the roll of bills in his pocket. Then Fred thought of something else. Nobody carried guns to the dances. Except for the outlaws, he probably had the only gun in the room, but there wasn't the slightest chance of his using it because Ed Godine was

standing in front of him, a cocked Colt in his hand.

"You," Jake Godine jerked a thumb at Rolf, and sailed his Stetson across the room to him. "Start collecting, and don't pass up a nickel."

Fred glimpsed Nancy's stricken face; he heard an "I told you so," along the wall. For a moment Fred Brown couldn't think straight. This wasn't Rolf Random out there collecting watches and money and rings from everybody in the room. It couldn't be. Then something made sense that Fred hadn't thought of before. Deacon Wells had started the talk that Rolf was one of the Godine gang, but how had Wells known?

Fred had been standing against the door jamb, Wells directly in front of him, and all the time Fred had been wondering how he could get his gun out from under his coat and make a fight out of it. Ed Godine had his eyes on him, and Fred thought the outlaw recognized him. If he did, there would be a dead Fred Brown before they left Rimrock. Men like Jake and Ed Godine wouldn't forget what had happened five years before. One thing was certain. If Fred made the slightest attempt to get his gun clear, he'd die now instead of later.

Rolf was slowly moving around the long circle, filling the high-crowned Stetson with money and other valuables, grinning at the cursings he received, and making bantering replies. The Godines were in the middle of the room, dark-garbed, sinister figures. Slowly Rolf worked along the wall until he came to the door, and dipping a hand into Deacon Wells's coat, drew out the fat roll of bills.

"Put it back," Wells hissed. "You ain't supposed to rob me."

Rolf laughed, and held up the roll of bills. "Jackpot, boys. The deacon must have been out robbing some farmer again. He claims he ain't supposed to be robbed."

"He ain't," Ed Godine said. "We ain't taking nothing off poor gents like him. He looks like he needs it."

"Don't know how you get favors like that," Rolf said loudly. He didn't replace the money, and as he shouldered through the crowd to Fred, Wells turned, his narrow face dark with suppressed rage. Rolf took Fred's purse, dropped the old gold watch into the hat, and said jovially, "You should have had your silver star along tonight." He had felt the gun in Fred's waistband, but he hadn't pulled it, and as he put a hand into Fred's coat pocket, his lips were close to Fred's ears. He said softly, "Don't forget you've got that iron."

TOO MANY things were happening to make sense to Fred Brown, but one thing was clear. Deacon Wells himself was into this up to his neck, or he wouldn't be getting any

favors from the Godine bunch. Wells hadn't intended for anybody but Rolf to hear what he'd said but Ed Godine had made a break Deacon Wells would have a hard time explaining when this was over.

Rolf turned toward the center of the room. "Hatful, boys," he called. "Come here and take a look at this diamond. You can quit working now, and set yourselves up in the Argentine with a real spread."

They moved toward him, and still Fred didn't see the play, but he knew there wasn't a diamond in Rimrock basin that would buy a spread in the Argentine. Fred stepped around Wells, his hand slowly lifting his gun, and then things happened. The four outlaws were close to Rolf when he flipped the hat over and the entire contents fell to the floor in a jingling heap.

Jake Godine let out an oath and instinctively the four outlaws scrambled for the loot Rolf had dropped. Fred jerked gun, then, and moved as swiftly as he could toward them. He called, "Hoist 'em in the air, boys. Fun's over with."

Rolf, spinning away from the four, pulled a gun as he barked, "That goes double, Jake. Don't make a move."

The Godines would have been caught in a cross fire if they had elected to fight it out. Slowly guns dropped to the floor and their hands came up. Rolf called, "Nancy, pick this stuff up and give it back to the owners while Fred and me take these boys to the calaboose. Looks like Wells pulled out, but I'll get him."

After the Godines were locked up, Rolf said, "I don't care anything about the kid who held the horses. Maybe this taught him a lesson, but I'm going to get Wells if I have to hunt him from here to Christmas. I knew somebody here was rigging the play for the Godines, but I didn't know who it was till he made that holler about his dinero. Reckon it was Wells who fixed it so the sheriff would be out of town." Rolf chuckled. "Old deacon was a

pious-talking gent, but he couldn't resist the chance to make an extra penny, legal or otherwise."

"Don't look like the pickings from the crowd would have been enough to have made the job worth while," Fred said.

"The idea was to hold folks in the lodge hall while they blowed the bank safe open. With the grain just sold, it would have been a big haul." Rolf started to turn away, and then wheeled back. "Maybe you'd better stay here, Fred, till the sheriff gets back. And tell Nancy why I can't take her home."

"Just who the hell are you?" Fred demanded.

"Trouble-shooter for the governor, assigned to get the Godines. Had to work awhile to get myself fixed up with 'em, but guess I pulled it off."

"They wouldn't need both you and Wells here—"

"Wells just made their plans. I bought the Ashton place so they'd have a hideout that was handy to town. I've got a suspicion that Wells aimed to sell 'em out for the reward, and Jake and Ed will think the same when I tell 'em about Wells saying I was hooked up with 'em. They'll talk."

"Nancy ain't got no business sashaying all over the state while you—"

Rolf's grin was a quick, wide flash across his boyish face. "The governor's going out of office in a few months, so I'm resigning. I kind of like it on the Ashton place. Figured I'd raise a crop of wheat, colts, and kids."

Fred, standing in the doorway of the sheriff's office, watched Rolf disappear down the street. He kind of wished he had his silver star to pin on his shirt. But then it wasn't important. Only two things were important. He wanted Nancy to be happy and he wanted to see his grandchildren. There wasn't any doubt about Nancy's happiness, and if his guess was right, he had a real good chance of seeing what his grandchildren would look like, after all.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Big Book Western Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1944. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Big Book Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form: That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October 1944. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 533-W-8, (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 5526—Ed, 1933.

FREE GRASS— FREE COFFINS

Chapter I

RED HEADS NEVER SAY DIE!

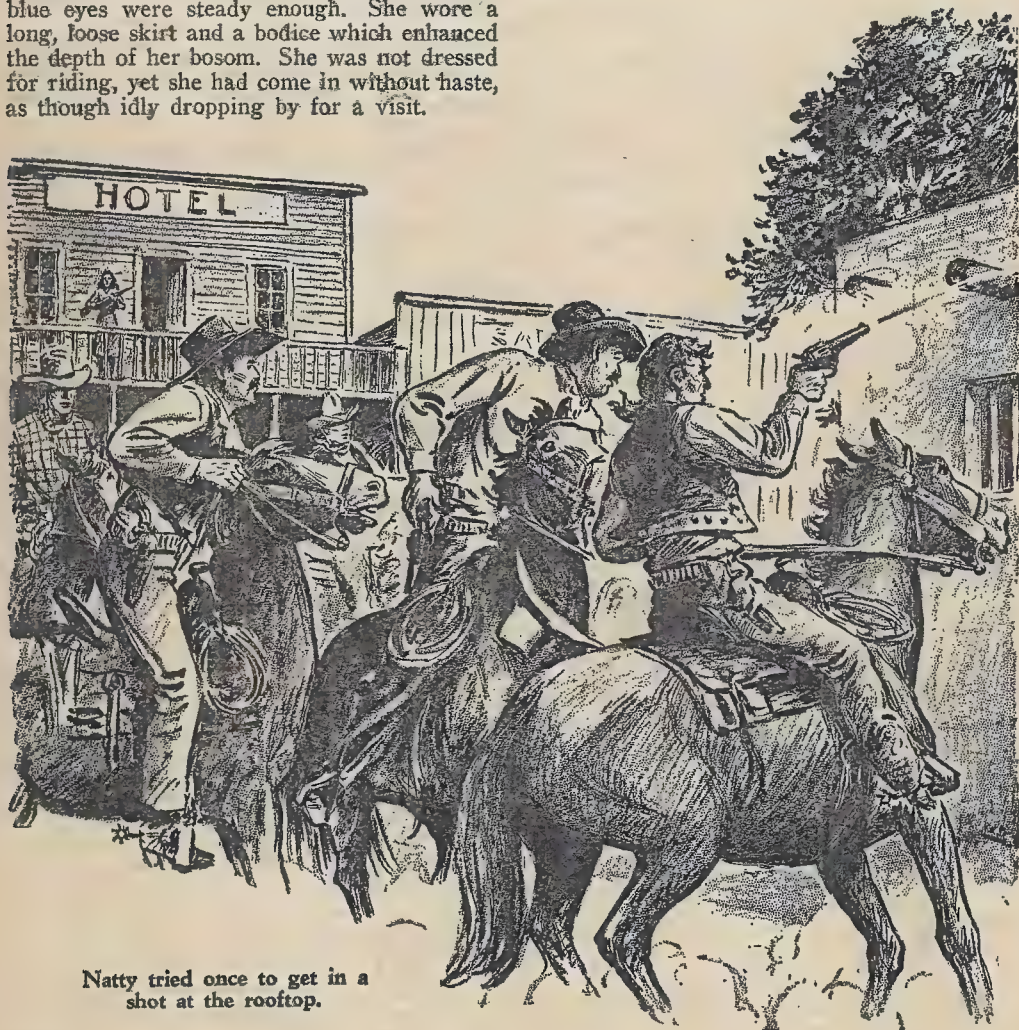
RED CHANDOR removed the battered hat he was wearing to dig post holes in his yard. The girl swung down from a tall chestnut horse. Red's eyes went to the brand on the steed's flank, then to the face of Della Lace. Her cheeks were scarlet, but her blue eyes were steady enough. She wore a long, loose skirt and a bodice which enhanced the depth of her bosom. She was not dressed for riding, yet she had come in without haste, as though idly dropping by for a visit.

She said, "You're really a hard worker, Red."

"My corral got torn down a bit," he said. "Last bunch of hosses were rough."

She said, "You're pretty rough yourself, Red."

His eyes swung back to the brand on the chestnut. It was a sort of Windowsash. It was blotched and ugly and it spread around the

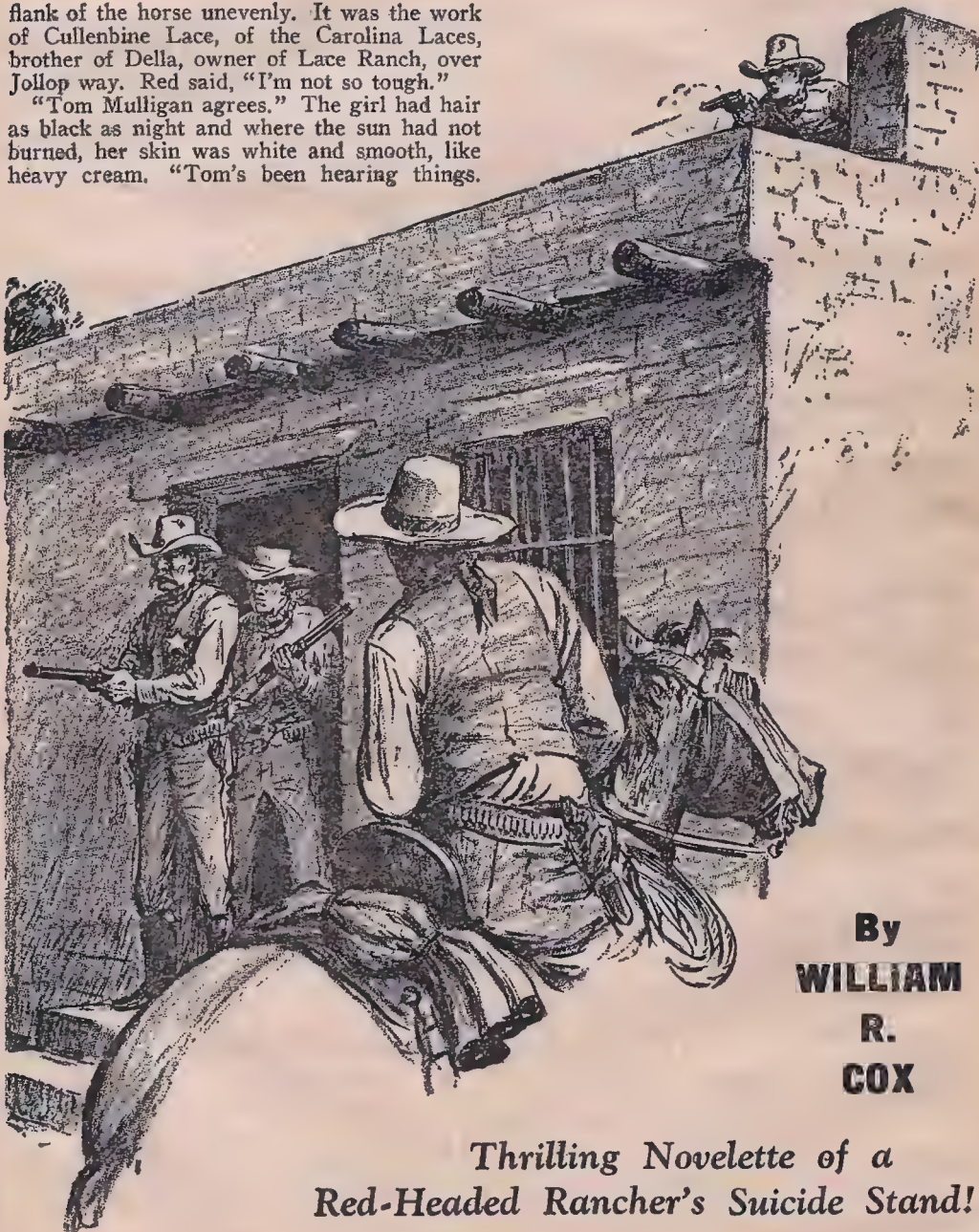


Natty tried once to get in a shot at the rooftop.

How could Red Chandor, lone rancher in range-hog country, hope to stem the crimson tide of graze-grabbing, when the gun-hand of every honest cowman was paralyzed by fear, and the price of free range was an equally free grave?

flank of the horse unevenly. It was the work of Cullenbine Lace, of the Carolina Laces, brother of Della, owner of Lace Ranch, over Jollop way. Red said, "I'm not so tough."

"Tom Mulligan agrees." The girl had hair as black as night and where the sun had not burned, her skin was white and smooth, like heavy cream. "Tom's been hearing things."



By
**WILLIAM
R.
COX**

*Thrilling Novelette of a
Red-Headed Rancher's Suicide Stand!*

He's heading for Far Hills tonight, to talk to you."

Red sank the spade in the firm earth and left it there, the handle pointing to the sky. It was a symbol of his energy and tireless labor, of the patient years he had put into DD Ranch, building it to a modest success, almost alone, bucking the Jollop crowd. He said mildly, "Well, I'll be there."

The girl dropped her pretense. Her face tightened and she said, "Red, why must you? Always fighting, defying the world. Why not sell out to Tom? It's not so bad. Cull gets more out of our place since we sold. Natty Blue spends his time playing poker in town and Tom pays him his share. Tom knows how to get better prices. He does business in a big way; he's a big man. . . ."

Red said, "He thinks he's a big man, all right. He means to have you too, you know, Della. How about that? You like that?"

She was whipcord lean in the flanks, like a good pony, and she strode forward with her hand poised to slap him. He caught her and swung her around and she went all soft, clinging to him, sobbing, "Tom outweighs you fifty pounds, darling. I can't stand him beating you, too. He's beaten everyone else who dared cross him. I can't stand for him—he uses the boots, Red. He'll kick you to death—because—because of me."

He said nothing. He was never a man to deny a truth. He soothed her and she straightened, regaining her icy control. She said, "I don't know if I can wait until Autumn for us to marry."

He turned and they both stared at the house. It needed shingles and a coat of paint, and inside it lacked comfortable furniture. The hard years, with cattle selling for next to nothing, had taken their toll of Red Chandor's slim resources. He said stubbornly, "You can't come home to this. I'm workin'. I'll be bringin' in a batch of wild ones and we'll see. Government is payin' mighty good prices for hosses up to standard. And I got that batch of fat steers up in the north field. Come Fall, we'll be able to fix things. If all goes well."

She said tautly, "If Tom Mulligan doesn't kill you tonight."

"Well, there's always that," he said. His eyes were green. They collided with hers, stormy, rebuking her for lack of faith.

She stepped away and leaped into the saddle of the chestnut before he could extend a helping hand. She said, "There is no use talking to you, Red Chandor. But please, at least carry a gun into town tonight."

He smiled at her. "I'll be over to visit tomorrow." She rode away without further words. He watched her go and the hand he extended to the spade handle was not quite steady.

His resolution was staunch enough, however. He did not remove the spade after all. He left it standing and went into the house. It was growing late on a Saturday afternoon and a man could work with profit just so many hours. He got a towel and some soap and went down to the brook and stripped.

RED CHANDOR was a man with smooth muscles up and down his back, and his biceps were steel springs. His flesh was solid and ruddy. He was heavier than he appeared, and the strength of his forearms was apparent as he lathered himself with the harsh soap. His hair was dully red, almost auburn, and there were freckles on his snub-nosed face.

He went back to the house and a man was sitting a horse in the yard with one leg hung over the pommel, slack, almost disinterested. It was Sheriff Hack Lee, a man whose drooping mustache seemed to typify his disposition. He said in a monotone, "Howdy, Red. I jest heard Mulligan was comin' over to Far Hills t'night. Whenever he rides to Far Hills there is trouble. I hear tonight it's you. Don't tote no gun."

Red said, "What's the matter, Hack, you gettin' the cowntown marshal habit? Don't tell me not to tote no gun."

"Mulligan fights with his fists. That's fair," said the sheriff. "Gun-fights leads to killin' and killin' leads to co't house doin's. Don't like it."

Red said, "Mulligan's got a dozen riders and his slave ranchers to side him. Natty Blue carries iron. Cull Lace wears a hide-out and stays drunk, mostly. And you want me to go agin them unarmed!"

The sheriff said, "You been tellin' it around Cull Lace stole a hoss. You been sayin' Tom means to run everybody outa Jaguar County and rule it his own way. Seems to me you been lookin' for this."

The towel around his middle, Red spread his feet and jutted his chin at the lawman. He said, "Listen, you hand-shakin', baby-kissin', mealy-mouthed brother, you get the hell outa my yard and off my land and stay off until you got a warrant. You show your nose around whilst I'm fightin' Tom Mulligan, or anybody else, and try to interfere and I'll lay the first one, if it's lead or if it's fists, right into your belly. Pin that in your fancy hat, you joke sheriff, and don't never forget it."

He turned and walked into the house. The sheriff did not leave at once, but neither did he make a move on the horse's back. He finished his cigarette, slid his eyes around the neat but homely environs of DD Ranch. Then he finally clucked to his horse and slowly rode off to the road which ran both ways, eastward to Far Hills and westward to the livelier town of Jollop.

Red Chandor put on a pair of striped pants and a dark blue shirt. He paused to roll a cigarette in brown paper, his fingers shaking a little with passion. It had been bad enough with the sheriff playing a hands-off game in the county, pretending to be neutral while Tom Mulligan went around talking about cooperation and harassing the small ranchers until they sold him a half interest, for a nominal sum, in their holdings. Now he was openly siding Mulligan. . . .

He blew smoke through his nose and donned his boots. They were low-heeled walking boots for town, glove soft. He let the trouser leg stay outside the tops, shaking out the creases, for he was a neat man.

He took down the heavy cartridge belt with its worn holster and .44 Colt revolver. He adjusted the harness and it went naturally to its place athwart his hips. Once, long ago, he had trailed up to Abilene and roistered through the cowtowns with the best of them, and no one had ever beaten him to the draw. He threw the gun a few times and the old habit came back. He was quick enough to fight anyone in Jaguar County or anywhere else, he expected.

Tom Mulligan was smart for a big man. That cooperative talk—that had really got some of them. Then, when the gang from the hills allegedly stole the little ranchers blind, and Mulligan talked more about combining to beat them off, it was duck soup for him to get what he wanted. Yes, for a hulk of a man, Mulligan was slick. Red had said so many a time, and Tom Mulligan had marked him down for it, tried to chivvy him around, had some of his cattle stolen.

But Red had few steers. He was a horse dealer, and his cayuses turned over so fast it was hard for Mulligan to get a good whack at them. Working secretly, not daring to bring in outsiders, just using such pretended honest riders as Slim, Salty, Levi, Dev and the other cowboys who worked for Mulligan's Crown Ranchero, it all had to be quick night work, and Red had learned to guard his stock well with his rifle and a hired hand or two when he needed them.

He had been able to hold out, all right, and for Della Lace he could do more, he thought grimly. He worked the muscles of his shoulders and went out to catch up Gringo, the big buckskin he had acquired in Mexico, the best trained work horse in the country. Gringo played hard to get for a moment or two, then seemed to giggle as he acquiesced in the operation of saddling and bridling him.

Red went back and locked up his house. He donned his Sunday cream-cooled sombrero and adjusted small rowels to the boots. He hesitated, went inside again and opened a drawer in his desk. There was a small, ugly,

snout-nosed revolver in the drawer. He touched it, then shook his head and left it there, relocked the door and mounted Gringo, who played bucking horse for a moment or two, then set sail for the main road at top speed, always playing the fool.

The road was broad and well traveled, for all the county business was between Far Hills, the county seat, and Jollop, the wide open cowboy town. It was a pretty good arrangement. Men like Daniel Starrett and Jobe Craven were happier running their banks and mills and large stores in Far Hills. The work hands were more comfortable where there were not so many women folk, and the Jollop bars ran all night when there was business to warrant it.

Della Lace lived on the edge of Jollop, in the small ranch house her brother had bought five years ago, and which now belonged partly to Mulligan. When Mulligan got ready, he would run out Cull Lace as he would any of the others—except perhaps Natty Blue, who was his confidant and best friend.

Well, it would be Autumn in a few months and if he could hold onto what he had and bring in just a normal sum of money, he and Della could start.

He rode into town and Starrett waved to him from in front of the bank. Red got down and Jobe Craven joined Starrett. The banker said excitedly, "Mulligan's in town. Blue is with him. They're drinking and talking. Mulligan's in the Wild Horse."

"You gentlemen are too excited," said Red. "Calm down. It's me he wants, not you."

Starrett said, "Red, you're a good man. If you were in Mulligan's position, this county would be better off. But is it wise to fight him?"

Red looked at the two men. They were not old—not more than forty, either of them. They wore city clothes, though, and only their faces were sun-touched. Their hands were soft, and their middles were getting soft, too. They ran the finances of Jaguar County, the stores, the bank, the mills.

Red said, "The trouble is, when a man gits something in this here country, he is either too busy holdin' it, or gits too old to enjoy it. Or to hang onto the very things in life he worked for. You're scairt of Mulligan. You're scairt he is going to take you over next, like he took over the ranchers. But do you back me, who won't truckle under to him nor sell out neither? No, you're scairt to do that, too."

Starrett said, flushing, "I'll back you with money any time you need it."

Craven added hastily, "You need shingles and paint. I'll give 'em to you, Red, on long credit. But Mulligan's goin' to raise hell to-night if you don't sell out to him. He only wants a half interest. Your spread ain't big—"

Red nodded without anger. "Sure. That's it. You figger it'll only be a small thing if I sell. And if I don't an' he gets riled, he might turn on you next and start tearin' you apart. And you ain't got the guts to fight him. You think you'll git the guts if I give you time. You think you can buy some time with my spread, my life. Gentlemen, I salute your nerve."

Starrett said, "You can't win. If you shoot him, it will be murder. He left his gun in my bank. He's unarmed."

"Is Natty Blue unarmed?" Red asked. He was watching up and down the street. He saw Pigeon, the breed, slip into the Wild Horse. He decided to leave Gringo at the bank, and got down, tying the horse with a slip-knot to the rack.

Starrett said, "Blue is not in this. Red, won't you reconsider? It's for the community. It's for all of us."

"Yeah," said Jobe, squinting helplessly. "He's liable t' do a thousand dollars wuth of damage t'night. He's a rough man."

Red said, "You're a great pair of codgers, all right. See you in church tomorrow." He hitched at his cartridge belt and started to walk down Main Street—straight for the Wild Horse Bar.

SHERIFF HACK LEE was a devious man. When politicking time was on, he was a whirlwind, going up and down the country, making sure he saw everyone, man, woman and child, talking in his slow, steady manner, agreeing with every expressed opinion, patting shoulders here and hands there, until everyone was certain that the sheriff understood him and was on his side.

Between elections, Hack Lee was more circumspect, less amiable, and never one to fraternize. His only relaxation seemed to be the poker games at the Wild Horse at Far Hills and the Bucket of Blood in Jollop, games that were mostly for small stakes and went on interminably through the years.

Thus, few men disliked the sheriff, and even Tom Mulligan could find no fault with him. He was a fair man, all agreed. He attended the affairs of the county with strict justice and prompt action. Jaguar County thought itself fortunate to have such a lawman, in more ways than one.

Still, in Far Hills there was an element which was not quite certain as to Hack Lee's virtues. Daniel Starrett remembered, for instance, that Lee had never brought in the raiders who had preyed upon the small ranch owners who had been better customers of Far Hills enterprises than was Tom Mulligan, who bought wholesale. Jobe Craven had been robbed twice and neither time had the law of Jaguar County come through with the crim-

inal, although a plain trail out toward Jollop had been left by the second thief.

Thus the droop-mustached man with the straw-colored hair and pale blue eyes was accounted neither saint nor sinner, but something in between. It was possible that he was aware of this and did not regret it; no man ever knew just what did go on under his floppy-brimmed old sombrero. Hack Lee rode into town long after Red Chandor on that fateful Saturday night and at once noted Gringo at the rack before the bank.

He got down from his own horse, stiffly, for he had been riding hard most of the day, and pulled his saddle bags loose. He took out a revolver and spun the cylinders, making sure it was ready. He slid it into the waistband of his trousers, buttoned his loose coat and walked, stiff-legged and weary, toward the Wild Horse.

A man came from an alley and whispered, "They begin."

"Sartain," said the sheriff without emotion. "You check around on what I told yuh?"

"Sartain. It's like you say." The man was a gray shape in the darkness. The lights in the Wild Horse splashed out onto Main Street. There were loud noises, but Hack Lee did not seem perturbed.

The sheriff said, "I knew Red wouldn't pull no gun on him. He's ornery, but he ain't no murderer—yet. If Mulligan took his place, broke him so he couldn't marry the gal, then he'd kill. But not when things is like they are."

The shadow said, "I dunno those things. I on'y do what you say."

"Good," nodded Hack Lee. "That's the kinda man I need. Go ahead and lay up around Jaguar Leap. I'll be out there next week. You got what grub you need and everything?"

"Sartain," said the man in the shadows. He melted away and was gone without sound. The sheriff walked on down the street. Outside the Wild Horse he paused, listening to the harsh voices within. He leaned, high-shouldered, hip-shot, against the post on the porch of the hotel. The racket was coming from the barn of course, the usually quiet bar where Starrett and Craven and their friends drank and played conservative, medium-high poker.

Tom Mulligan was at one end of the bar. Natty Blue was with him. Tom Mulligan was as high as a man can comfortably grow, and Natty Blue always looked stunted beside him, although Blue was medium height. Mulligan's rock-like face was square and ugly, his mouth almost lipless, a straight slash across his face. His jaw was square, with only a slight cleft to mark it from a primordial chin. His shoulders were door-wide, his legs like oaks. He had fists as large as picnic hams

and blond hair bristled on his body, pig-like.

Natty Blue was soft and almost effeminate. His hands were slim and white and crawling always, like white mice. His face was rodent-like, too, and his eyes, pinkish, never rested. He said in his precise voice, "He is armed, Tom, and you are not. He is provoking a fight on purpose to murder you."

At the poker table in the corner, Starrett gasped audibly and Mulligan turned to stare at the banker. Nobody spoke and the bartender, pallid, was ready to duck from behind the spigots. Mulligan said, "I'll give you another chance, Red. Either I'll buy you, or you buy me! Haw, haw, haw!"

Red stood squared to the bar, legs spread a little. He was alone at his end, and at the other end were only Mulligan and Blue. Everyone else had deserted the moment the fireworks opened with Mulligan's flat challenge to him to sell out and leave the country.

Pigeon, however, was in the crowd, the cross-eyed breed with the long knife. Blue wore weapons under his clothing, an arsenal of them, all loaded and handy. Slim and Salty were there, of the Crown crew. Without seeming to, Mulligan was backed by a crew armed to the teeth.

Like the spade left with its edge in his soil, Red Chandor stood free and alone. He drank his whiskey with one easy throw of his hand. There was silence in the bar. Thirty men were crowded back against the walls, but none spoke.

Red said, "How much you want for your interests, Tom?"

"Haw!" Mulligan's humor was not even skin deep. "One hundred thousand dollars, cash on the barrel head. That's what I think of Jaguar County."

Red said mildly, "Gold? Or will you take greenbacks?"

Someone snickered nervously and Mulligan snapped, "Don't start pullin' wool over my eyes, Red Chandor. You been talkin' big. Now put up, or sell out. You're holdin' back the wheels of progress in Jaguar County."

Red said, "You keep talkin' like you was runnin' for office. You gonna buck Hack Lee next election, Tom?"

Again the snicker sounded. Mulligan's eyes roiled angrily, searching for the offender and his men moved uneasily in the crowd. Mulligan said, "I'm talkin' turkey to you, Red. You sell out to me, or git out."

"Now, that's the first time you've come into the open. Sell out or git out, huh?" Red balanced himself on his low-heeled walking boots. "How would you like to go to hell, Tom Mulligan?"

He poured another drink, sipped half of it, not even glancing at the big man. One of Mulligan's huge paws went out, pushing Natty

Blue gently aside. He took two giant strides which put him opposite Red, only a couple of yards separating them.

Red said mildly, "I see you ain't wearin' a gun, Tom. Make Natty put his out where they can be seen—and taken up."

Mulligan said, "You gonna sell out?"

It was an idle question. He was giving his men time to get set, Red knew. The time had come and there was only one or two things to do. There was never any question which course Red would take, only of his methods.

He stood at the bar, moving his hands carefully. He said, "All right—there's enough people here, I reckon, to keep Blue quiet. He works better in the dark."

The white-skinned man snarled, but Mulligan motioned impatiently for silence. "You're dealin' with me, Red. That'll be enough. When you get through dealin' with me, you won't be in shape to tackle Natty."

"Reckon you're right," said Red, shrugging. He had the belt unbuckled. He rolled it and placed it on the bar with great care. He patted himself openly, showing that he had no other weapons. He said, "You're a big, rough, tough man, Tom. You've almost whipped Jaguar County. But you—ain't—whipped me—yet!" He picked up the whiskey glass and threw it into the glaring eyes of the bigger man.

Chapter II

RACE FOR THE BORDER

HE HAD no chance of avoiding a beating, and he had little chance of doing damage of his own unless he acted with despatch. He had red hair, but he was cool in action, and his left fist was followed by his right as he swung on the startled Mulligan. Before the big rancher could open his eyes, Red was clouting him across the floor, pinning him to a suddenly deserted wall.

Natty Blue was screaming, "Dirty! He threw whiskey in Tom's eyes!"

No one paid the slightest attention. The Crown riders were caught in the milling, wildly interested mob. Hopes burgeoned in certain breasts as Red beat his fists against the huge frame. This early work might count in the balance.

Tom Mulligan got his eyesight back as a looping right knocked him to the floor. He threw up his elbow to protect his face, but Red could not go in with the short spurs and finish it.

Mulligan said hoarsely, "Okay. You had yer chance. You tried it and it didn't work. I'm comin' at yuh now, Red. Say yer prayers."

Mulligan's face was bleeding. One lip was cut, one eye partly shut. He arose like a beast

from the slimey jungle, his great arms bowed. He walked forward slowly, stumping on his thick legs. His eyes were stony. He reached out one arm to prop Red in its mighty grasp while he struck with the other.

Red ducked. Then, instead of running away, he bent and rammed forward. His fists went into Mulligan's middle, beating, slashing, tearing. His head was on the corded chest of the giant, and his labor-strengthened back muscles went into every blow.

He felt Mulligan give even as the first shortened, club-like blow struck him alongside the head. He went back and almost down. Mulligan took another step and kicked.

Red barely flung himself aside in time to avoid that kick which would have put him where further kicking would finish him, blind him, perhaps kill him. He reached out blindly and seized Mulligan's boot.

He got a good grip, by luck, below the spur. He braced himself and heaved. Big as Mulligan was, the leverage was against him. He seemed to sunfish like a bucking horse. He crashed to the floor with force enough to shake the hotel on its foundations.

There was a sharp exhalation from the audience. Strangely, there had been no cheers for either man. Mulligan's men were preserving a pseudo anonymity, as though they were not present to see the end go their way, and townsfolk feared Crown and its owner. Natty Blue yelled, "Foul again! He's a dirty fighter!"

Again Red did not use the boots. Drawing big gulps of air into his lungs he backed away, seeking some of the strength he knew he would need. He saw Mulligan crawl erect, pulling himself up with a hand grip on the bar, saw the big man coming again, bleeding, bruised, inexorable. Mulligan said, "Two chances. You ain't bright, Red. If I get you down, yer a dead duck, I'm warnin' yuh."

Red leaped. He was not expected to attack, therefore he did so. He led with a stiff left in front of his charging shoulder. He prodded it like a battering ram into Mulligan's face. The giant actually reeled, then chopped a short swinging blow, shrewdly aimed, at Red's body.

The blow landed. It seemed to tear out Red's ribs and scatter them about the floor. The power in the big man's fists was phenomenal. In a hundred encounters, no one had ever hit Red close to that hard. He tried to get sideways and make a smaller target.

A winging punch knocked him over the top of the bar. The big paws reached for him. He felt himself lifted high, felt giddiness engulfing him.

He was agile, and he managed to squirm. Mulligan was dashing him to the floor, seeking to knock the breath from him. He turned in mid-air and landed half on his feet, spring-

ing away from the giant form of Mulligan.

They were both bleeding now. Red, against the wall, saw the crouching, hulking form coming at him. He set his shoulders and kicked at Mulligan's kneecap. He got home and the big man staggered, howling at the pain.

Again Red came to the attack, doggedly, like a stubborn bull beating his brains out against a sturdy barn wall. His fists went at Mulligan's belly, with everything he ever had or hoped to have riding in the array of punches. He got into the soft flesh, which lay beneath the corrugated muscles, and again and again he punched.

He swarmed back and Mulligan's mouth was open. Mulligan's fist knocked Red in a carom off the bar, but Red spread his legs and managed to stay on his feet. Mulligan was standing like an oak in a storm, his mouth green at the edges.

Red leaped and curled a right to the midsection and a pronging left straight to the chin. Mulligan winced. Red measured him, propping back his head with a jabbing left. Mulligan's huge hands hung helpless.

Red hit him with all he had. It was a punch whip-like and crackling. It made a loud snapping sound when it landed.

Mulligan went full length. He lay there while the dust rose and settled about him. His toes twitched once, then there was no further motion in him.

Red's face was like a sore boil and inwardly he quaked. But he managed to walk to the bar. The bottle of whiskey stood firm, and he picked it up and poured a drink. His hand shook, all right, but he got it up and drained the glass.

Natty Blue yelled hysterically, "All right, boys. He fouled Tom. Let him have it!"

Blue had a derringer from up his sleeve in his right hand and in his left a short-barreled gun from his armpit holster. He also carried a Bowie in his boot and another gun inside his waistband, it was said. Red leaned against the wall and swept a glance around the bar.

Slim and Safty were hesitating. They were in a strict minority and their principal had lost. Natty Blue was not a fighter in the real sense of the word and did not understand the nuances of such a situation. The two Crown riders had come forward and bent over Mulligan. They sort of stuck out like sore thumbs, they felt, and their hands did not go to their belts.

Natty Blue said, "I'll kill him myself."

From the doorway, Hack Lee drawled, "I wouldn't, Blue. It looked like a fair fight to me. You shoot Red, it'll be a hangin' fer you."

Someone in the crowd said, "Thet's fer sure, Sheriff. You tell 'im!"

It was enough. Public opinion crystallized. Hack Lee shrugged and turned to leave the bar. Men swarmed around Red Chandor, patting his back, buying him drinks. But he escaped from them and, aching in every bone, was going out the door when Daniel Starrett caught his arm. The banker said, "You beat him. Now he'll kill you. He never meant to be beaten in a fair fight. Watch out, Red. I admire your courage—but he'll be after you now."

Red said, "I know. 'Scuse me, Starrett, I got a date with my gal." He mounted the horse in front of the bank and rode out of town.

IT WAS midnight when he quartered in at Cull Lace's buildings, approaching from the rear. He dismounted and let Gringo's reins trail while he walked in the shadows, wanting no trouble with Cull now, weak from the blows Mulligan had landed, the inside of his mouth torn against his teeth, blood salty on his palate. He picked up some loose pebbles and threw them against the second-story window where Della slept.

He heard an answer and leaned against the house at the corner nearest the barn. His mind was racing along. He had known what to do when he left Far Hills. Starrett's warning had been unnecessary. So soon as Mulligan recovered he would be issuing orders to get DD Ranch, to crush Red Chandor.

No one would interfere. It would be done at night, under the guise of outlawry from the hills. They would shoot his cattle, burn his outbuildings. If he did not protect himself they would do it boldly; if he was very clever and very quick they might be forced to more subtle methods. But the end would be the same—the might of Crown and its satellite ranches against little DD.

There were footsteps and he called in low accents, "Della?"

A club came at his head. He never knew why he ducked, receiving only a glancing blow. He saw the man behind the club and stepped back. He was almost too weary to fight. He reached into the depths of his wish to survive to bring forth a swinging punch. He caught the man before he could recover balance and knocked him sideways. He jumped, seizing the club, a wagon wheel spoke of hickory which would have split his skull had it landed. He threw the club away and beat the man briefly, with his sore fists, until he went spinning along and fell in the dust.

A lamp was lit indoors and the orange beam came through and fell across the face of the man in the dirt. He was bloodied and his mouth was slack and weak. He said thickly, "Damn you, Chandor, keep away from my sister. Mulligan will take care of you."

Red ignored the drunken weakling who had sold half of Della's ranch to Tom Mulligan. He went to the window and the girl wore a shawl over a full length nightgown. He whispered, "I'm takin' my cattle out. I'll make the border before they can get together and hit me, and my friend Pedro Gonzales will rent me a pasture. I'll sell 'em in Mexico, if I have to, but I can't leave them for Mulligan to shoot or poison."

She said, "You're hurt! Did Cull—"

"He missed me," said Red without bitterness. "He's half drunk again. It was Tom beat me."

She said, "Oh, Red, I warned you."

"Well," he told her, drawling a little, "he didn't win. That's why I got to git. I wanted you to know I'd be back. He'll maybe think I'm runnin' away."

She looked back him to where her brother struggled to rise in a semi-stupor, falling back spotted with the dirt and the liquor, drooling, a gross, sodden young man, a caricature of his handsome sister. She said, "Nobody will think you are running away, Red. You underestimate your reputation in Jaguar County. They will know exactly what you are doing. That you are getting ready to return and fight, that you are merely lightening your burdens so that you can fight the harder. Did you need to beat Cullenbine so badly?"

Red said, "He nearly killed me with a hickory stick and ordered me to stay away from you."

"Tom stopped by on his way to Far Hills and left a bottle," she said steadily. "It was his idea that you be ordered off."

"He's a great idea man," Red said, "but I'll have to see him about it later. I'm ridin' south, now."

She said, "Alone? You're running those steers alone?"

"I couldn't hire anyone without tippin' my hand," he explained. "And anyway, right now there ain't anyone in Jaguar County'd dare work for me!" He leaned through the open window and said abruptly, "One kiss. I got to go."

She kissed him, and he tore himself away. He saw Cullenbine Lace staggering toward the barn and wondered if the drunk had a shotgun out there. He mounted swiftly and took himself out of the way of his girl's brother. He wondered what he would do, finally, about that problem. Cull was no good, through and through, a wastrel, lazy, stupid. It was amazing that Della could own such a brother.

Red stopped off first at the ranch house to get some food and change his clothes. Then he rode on.

He found the herd quietly grazing and started them, and they went along tractably enough. They were well fed and there was

plenty of water on the route. He did not expect any trouble from the steers.

He took his rifle from the boot and shoved it where it was handiest. The sort of trouble he did expect could be handled only by rifle and revolver fire. He thought he heard a rider thunder past on the road below. He waited, praying the cattle would not make enough noise to be heard. In quick silence lay his only hope of getting a start toward Mexico.

THE rider paused at the entrance to the Lace ranch. He swung into the yard as he saw the staggering figure of the drunk in the backyard. The lamp downstairs had been extinguished and Della's voice said peremptorily, "Come in here at once, Cull. It's a mercy Red didn't beat you to death!"

There was no answer from the drunken man in the yard. He had a pitchfork in his hands and seemed to be looking for something. The rider went in softly, got close. He drew a long-barrelled revolver and said, "Cull, look here."

The drunk swung, staring. The barrel fell, once, twice, even as the man plunged earthward. The steel bit sharply into bone. Cullenbine Lace never moved as he lay on the ground. The rider swung his horse over soft ground, dismounted, crouched, pulling a poncho from his saddle.

Della said from within the house, "You can lie out there in your drunken stupor, then. I'm ashamed, degraded. . . ." The lamp reappeared in an upstairs window and the girl's face peered out. The rider dragged his poncho over the tracks his horse had made, retreating rapidly beyond the light thrown by the lamp.

Cullenbine Lace never moved again. . . . The rider disappeared into the night.

* * *

Southward, Red Chandor, sleepless, drove the cattle. They went over Jaguar Leap and down the valley. They watered and kept going, neither willing nor reluctant so long as they had water. Red rode like three men, chivvying his herd to safety.

It was night of the second day when he heard noises which could only mean pursuit. He was throwing the bunch across a road, hitting the short cut to the Rio. He sent the gaunt Gringo to a hill and sat there, looking down.

It was Dev and Levi, two of the Crown riders, and they were hot on his trail. They crossed the road and showed caution, getting under a tree and confabbing together there. Dev, who was the tracker, got down and examined the bent blades of grass. He could tell then that the herd was closed ahead. He gesticulated, and remounted his cayuse. The two swung and rode the back trail at top speed.

Reluctantly, Red forbore following. He went back to the herd and sent them through

the ford of the Serpent River. He was close enough to the border to begin to look for friends. He had sent a telegram from the station at Porte, and if Pedro had received it, all would be well across the Rio.

He got the herd moving. He had an old longhorn leader who had a lot of savvy and he kicked it into the arroyo which would lead to an open plain. Beyond the plain was the river, the border and safety. But it was necessary to get the cattle out on the plain and running. If he could manage that without being dry-gulched, he thought grimly, he would take his chances.

The leader switched his tail, hesitated. Red swung Gringo in close and whicked the longhorn critter with his quirt. The big steer tossed his head, but moved smartly into the arroyo. The others poured after him. Red sat on Gringo, facing rearward, waiting with bated breath for an enemy to show himself.

The last of the critters went in. Red dropped to earth, rifle in his hands. He clapped Gringo softly on the flank and said, "Go on, hoss. Git after 'em. Run 'em clear to the Rio fer me, Gringo!"

The buckskin whinnied, cheerfully wheeled and went on into the arroyo behind the trailing little band of dogies. The horse knew its work better than a good many two-legged cowhands, Red thought. He stumbled a bit, and realized how weary he was. But he gained a thicket on the back trail and hunkered down, gouging at his bloodshot eyes to keep them open.

It was Pigeon who came first, warily studying the trail. Dev was with him, both dismounted, leading their mounts. Behind them Levi, Salty and Slim came laden with arms. Pigeon was a lowering, dirty breed with all the bad habits of his Indian forebears and none of their nobility. He paused and grunted, "One hour, mebbe two. We go now."

He reached to gather his reins. Red sighted along the rifle barrel, closing his tired eyes, then opening them wide. He touched the trigger.

Pigeon's horse gave a great leap and dropped dead, a bullet through its skull. Pigeon froze where he stood. Red called from his thicket, "Howdy boys. You want to rush us? I got me four men cached around here. I ain't much for murderin', but what the hell, you're askin' for it."

They were right in the open, they had never expected him on the back trail. He had been alone, according to the tracks, and in a hurry. Their mouths hung open. Pigeon screamed, "No got nobody! The devil!" He grabbed up his rifle and swung around.

Red shot the breed without compunction. Then he wheeled and scuttled like a rabbit through the brush to a position ten yards away.

He lifted his rifle from that spot and sent a shot among the others, aiming a little high.

Dev, a lowering big man, held his hands behind his neck and said sourly, "We believe yuh, Red. Yuh gonna kill us in cold blood?"

Red had managed to get back to his original spot. He said, "I'm goin' to hold yuh right here until my men get the herd over the river. Your boss forgot about my friends down yonder, I reckon. There are enough of 'em to take care of any sorry lil old gang like you-all. Now hunker down and if yuh feel like takin' a shot at me or my men, just go ahead. We'll shoot back—and we're under cover. Jest set awhile, boys, and smoke if you like. Yuh can even play cards, if yuh thought to bring a deck. But don't take a step forward!"

Dev said, "Kin we kiver Pigeon with a tarpaulin? He'll be drawin' blow flies in a lil while."

"Hell, yuh can bury him," said Red carelessly. "I don't care."

They were fairly caught and they did not make a bad move. The hours passed. It was dusk when Dev raised his arms and said, "Well, may as well go on down and make sure he got 'em over."

Slim said, "Whatta yuh mean, Dev? I dowanna get shot by no Mex in them bushes."

Dev said, "There ain't been nobody in them bushes fer hours."

Slim arose and stared. He said, "Well, then what we doin' here?"

"Makin' sure," said the older man calmly. "There mought have been someone. It only needed one man, didn't it? He had cover, we had none. He laid his trap good and we rode into it. And it's known Red's got friends over in Mexico."

Slim said, "We coulda tried it agin one man. Hell, Dev—"

"How much wages you git?" Dev asked curiously. "More'n me? More'n enough to go tearin' into an ambush?"

Levi guffawed. He said, "Dev's got the hull thing right, Slim. Let's go down an' make sure the devil got 'em over. He's tough and he's smart, this one. Tom'll play hell beatin' him by straight methods."

"You ain't jest a talkin'," said Dev. They moved cautiously, and there was no challenge from the bushes. They got on their horses and rode into the gathering twilight, coming into the arroyo. Beyond stretched the plain and the river was closer than they had thought. Shrugging, they turned and headed back for Jaguar County to report to their boss. . . .

Over the river, Pedro Gonzalez was trying to send vaqueros back with Red Chandor. He was voluble in Spanish, protesting that Red could not fight the entire Jaguar country.

"I know," said Red patiently. "But you can't afford to get in it. Just you put my mon-

ey for the beef in the bank at El Paso and I'll be around later."

"You will be keel, amigo," said Gonzalez sadly. "Thees Mulligan, I know heem." He lapsed into Spanish again, cursing. "He is keeler, destroyer. . . ."

Red said, "You sure do know him, Pedro. Well, I'll be seein' you. I'm thinking about taking my honeymoon in Mexico. Have a room ready for me." He waved and rode Gringo away from the huge hacienda. He and the horse were both rested and the bruises of battle had disappeared from him. He felt pretty good again. He wondered how Mulligan felt.

He was, he found, a good hater. He had worked hard, over the years, and Mulligan's threat to the fruits of his labor was something which struck deep. What a man has earned, he found, he will defend with his last drop of blood. He rode past the place where he had killed Pigeon without curiosity enough to look for a grave. He put Gringo to the trail and jaunted northward, his blood quickening with every mile.

THEY HELD the inquest in town. Natty Blue said in his high, strange voice, "There is no doubt. Della admits Chandor was there, that he had a fight with Cullenbine Lace. It was cold-blooded murder."

The coroner, Malachi Brown, said, "Nobody ast yuh for your opinion, Blue."

"I was on the road. I saw Chandor ride away, very swiftly," said Blue. "I stopped to pay my respects to my friend, Cull Lace. He was dead, his skull fractured."

Hack Lee caressed his drooping mustache. He said, "Where was Tom Mulligan right then?"

"I have no idea," said Blue. "He had ridden ahead."

Brown scowled. He said, "Cull mighta fallen agin somethin'. He was drunk. His own sister says he was drunk."

Blue arose, preparatory to leaving the improvised witness stand in the bar of the Wild Horse. He said spitefully, "Della is known to be romancing with Red Chandor. After all—"

Hack Lee roared with amazing wrath, "Suh, are you impugnin' the word or the character of a lady in this heah co't?"

Blue said, "Er—of course not, Sheriff." He looked startled, staring at Lee as though he had expected no opposition from this source.

"Then git outa here," said Lee. He watched the pale man stalk from the bar. He turned to Brown and said impatiently, "Git it over with. I got ridin' to do."

The coroner said doubtfully, "Waal, Red done rode south with his cattle, we all know that. Now, if he was to never come back, we could take it he kilt Cull—mebbe not intendin'

to, on account of Red could whip Cull any day in the week and twicet on Sunday, we all know thet. But on the other hand, mebbe Cull said somethin' 'bout Della Lace an' Red lost his temper. Red done had a bad time in town thet night. Now, Della Lace sez Red beat Cull, then left, and thet it was two hours later Natty Blue woke her with the news Cull was layin' dead near the barn. So Red would had to go away, like Della sez, she bein' a lady and not a liar, and then come back and skulled Cull. If you jurors think it was thetaway, you'll have to vote he done it, perhaps."

Hack Lee turned his pale eyes away to conceal amusement. The jurors went to the end of the bar and debated. Malachi Brown, who was the local undertaker and carpenter as well as coroner, came close and whispered, "What side you on, anyway, Hack?"

"On the side of the law," said the sheriff stonily. "Like I swore when I was elected."

Brown said spiritedly, "Then why aincha out stoppin' Mulligan from burnin' Red outa house an' barn, which everyone knows he will do?"

"'Cause Mulligan ain't done it yet and I ain't hired to guard the property of private land owners," said Lee flatly. "There's your jury with the verdict. You shore confused 'em."

Jobe Craven was foreman. He said stiffly, "We, the jury, find the deceased met his death by violence at the hands of—person or persons unknown."

Malachi heaved a sigh of relief. He said, "Whew! I was scairt someone was gonna say Red Chandor done it and I know he never did. He ain't no murderer."

Hack Lee was heading for the door. He said over his shoulder, "Thet's something everybody is, in his heart, one time or another in his life." He banged out the door and was gone aboard his tireless cayuse, heading west.

He rode straight to the Lace Ranch. He passed the side road leading to Chandor's DD spread, but saw no sign that Red had returned. He came into the Lace place and dismounted. Della was in town and the hired help was not in sight.

He walked carefully around the yard. He had been over the ground early on the day the body was removed, but bootprints had been all over everything. And he had never found the track of a horse leading to or from the spot where Cull lay.

Yet he had examined the wound with utmost care, for he was a man who took pains about small things. He had pulled his own gun and laid the muzzle against the wound in Cull's head. Several attempts had convinced him of one thing. Cull Lace had been struck by someone sitting a horse. The angle of the wound proved it.

Yet no horse had left prints in the backyard. There had been no rain, and he had looked carefully.

He had easily picked up Gringo's hoof-marks, in the front of the house. He was sure enough that Gringo had come in and gone out without traversing the yard alongside or beyond the house. This did not finally prove anything, he supposed, but it gave him something to chew upon.

He rode west, but not all the way to Crown. He shoved into a thicket and cocked a leg over the pommel of his hull, smoking, drooping, waiting.

After a while a man rode along the trail, paused and whistled a whip-poor-will call. He was a nondescript man, of medium height and appearance. He wore dusty clothing and his hammerhead cayuse had seen rough riding that day.

Hack Lee rode out of the thicket and said, "Howdy, Will. You find him?"

"Sartain," said Will. "He's comin' up."

"Got acrost the Rio all right?"

"Sartain. Lost nary a beef. Kilt Pigeon, too."

Hack Lee said, "Yuh don't say? Pigeon, huh?"

"Shot him with a rifle."

Hack Lee shook his head. "Natty Blue raised a ruckus at th' inquest. When ye git rested, ye can sorta look after thet one."

The man called Will said, "Sartain." He clucked to his weary pony and rode east, toward Far Hills.

"Best damn deputy a man ever had," Hack Lee muttered to himself. "Now I wonder what Mulligan is up t'?"

He turned his horse's head toward Crown.

DOWN SOUTH, Red was coming up the trail without haste, making plans. He was fully aware that Mulligan would tie into him, but there was little the owner of Crown would do other than burn him out. It would be bad policy to do that, for the people of Jaguar County, being vulnerable to burnings themselves, would frown upon such an act, knowing full well the perpetrator.

Yet what else could Crown do to him? His small string of horses would not attract them. His cattle were safe. He had not yet rounded up his string of wild ones for the horse market. Perhaps Mulligan would do nothing until Red had broken his catch for this year.

But he knew better than that. Tom Mulligan was not one to smart silently under the beating he had taken. He would be raging with humiliation and desire for revenge. Red rode alone warily, keeping to the by-paths he knew so well. He came into the home county and the hills were pleasantly cool around him and summertime was lush and rich in promise of

the Autumn to come, with harvests for all and fine fodder for live stock.

He came to the road, paused. Looking up and down he saw no sign of life. He spurred the buckskin gently and went across the road and along the border of trees which skirted the trail to Lace Ranch.

He was suddenly afire with eagerness to see Della. He entered a small clearing, then was aware that this space was newly cleared, that there had been a copse of heavy growth here a week ago. Gringo stopped dead. Red stared down at a newly dug mound of earth.

There was a wooden cross at its head. Red's heart came up and lodged in his throat and stuck there, and he kicked Gringo so sharply that the faithful animal bolted through the trees. They rounded the corner of the hedge and went into the yard and the buckskin slid on its haunches as Red dropped to earth running, and called, "Della! Darling! Della!"

When she came to the door and stood staring at him, he thought he would burst with joy. He bounded up the steps and reached for her.

She backed away, into the house. She said wanly, "Red—you're back."

He said, "What happened? What's the matter?"

"It's Cull," she said. "He was killed—the night you were here, the night you left."

He said, "Killed? How?"

"His skull was fractured," she said steadily. "You beat him, Red. Could you have killed him?"

Red gripped the back of a chair, thinking hard. He rehearsed every move, remembered Cull retreating to the barn. He muttered, "He went into the barn. Or at least toward it. I thought he was going for a gun. I don't know if he even made the barn, but he was walkin' when I took off from here."

She heaved a deep sigh. She said, "Natty Blue has been telling stories. Some people in town think you and Cull quarrelled over me, and that you killed him. I let it out that you had fought with him. I didn't mean to tell anything on you, Red. It slipped out, I was so distraught."

He said, "You were in trouble and I was away. I'm sorry, Della."

She said, "People are saying that Cull stood between us. I'd—I'd like to find out who did kill him before we—get married, Red."

There was this thing between them, then. He found no blame for her. He said woodenly, "Yes, Della. I'll do what I can."

She said, "Hack Lee has been around, snooping. I don't quite know what to make of him. He seems on all sides at once."

Red said, "He's a hard man to shave."

"There's Will Blake, from Jollop, always riding the countryside," she said. "A strange,

quiet little man, always saying 'Sartain' and not much else."

"I know him. Also a hard rock," said Red. "If Hack Lee has sold out to Mulligan—"

She said, "They could frame you, Red. They'd hang you."

"Yes," he said. "I'll see what I can do, Della." He walked out of the house and across the porch. She followed only to the doorway and stood, her hand against the frame, watching him.

She said, "I'm going to town and stay at the hotel for awhile. We're shipping the cattle—Mulligan is taking over, of course. He's offered me five thousand for the remaining half of the ranch. I suppose I'll take it."

Red said, "Whatever you say, Della." Lace bordered Crown and was miles from DD's boundaries. He got on the horse and said, "I'll see you in town, then." It was all dead and static and the cloud came in and gathered about his head, black and foreboding.

He rode for the home ranch, realizing now how much of it had been tied up in Della Lace. Working alone, laboring over the house, making plans for paint and uncracked glass and new furniture would be bootless for a man alone.

The gulf between them might narrow, but he felt helpless against the odds. On top of Mulligan's enmity now hung the suspicion of murder—as though he would stoop to murder Cull Lace. If he had killed Lace, he would have called in the sheriff at once and explained the circumstances. Anyone should know that about Red Chandor.

He began to grow angry, thinking that they should suspect him of a foul killing and flight southward. He wondered what Hack Lee thought about it. He rode into his own yard seething with anger.

He saw nothing untoward about the place. His horses had been grazing in the house pasture. Nothing seemed disturbed. He unsaddled Gringo and sent him to join the rest of the cavy and went into the house, opening doors and windows to air the place.

The moment he sat down at his desk he knew something was wrong. He couldn't quite place it, but something was disarranged. He got up and walked around the small room at the left of the T-shaped ranch house.

He paused, staring at the spare cartridge belt upon the wall. He always hung it semi-rolled over the wooden pegs. The gun butt slanted at the wrong angle. He was a neat man of careful habits and he had not hung that gun that way.

He stepped across the room just as a voice said, "All right. Hold it, Chandor."

He froze, his hands spread. The voice was cold, but underneath it was hot with hate. He said, "What are you doin' here?"

Mulligan stepped through the door. He said, "Folleyed yuh in, Red. Me and Natty and some of the boys. Thought we'd take a look at somethin'."

Natty Blue went past Tom, his pallid face twisted into a sneer. He reached for the holstered gun in the belt. He yanked it down and said, "There you are. Knew it. There's hair on it, and blood, yet. You can see it is Cull Lace's hair by the color."

The gun muzzle was stained, all right. Red stared at it and said dully, "What damned fool would leave it that way? This is a frame."

"Natty knowed you did it," said Mulligan curtly. "That jury in Far Hills was rigged. Della herself said you'd beat him. You're quite a fighter with yer fists, ain't you, Red? A reg'lar professional. But you overdid it this time, wallopin' Cull, then beatin' out his brains."

Red said, "You know I didn't bring no gun back here with blood an' hair on it an' put it in the holster dirty. Nobody could be that dumb."

"You prob'ly got your guns mixed," said Mulligan triumphantly. "You took off that night. You prob'ly took the wrong gun."

Red subsided. There was nothing to be done about it. He saw the cynical face of Dev, of Slim. They knew, but they also knew he had killed Pigeon, down to the south, and held them at bay during the hot day, for which they had taken a fierce tongue lashing on their return to their boss.

Mulligan said, the eagerness almost choking him, "Get his hog-leg, Dev. We got him this time. If they don't hang him, I'll hang him. But I want this legal. I want Hack to handle it, and the judge to sentence him."

Natty Blue said, "My evidence'll do it, in a fair court. Don't you worry, Tom, we've got him." He was fawning like a yellow dog, Red thought disgustedly. "You and I, Tom, we'll show them!"

Dev lifted the gun. There was nothing for Red to do but surrender. There were four men who would have shot him with pleasure and told their own story of the tell-tale revolver afterwards.

Chapter III

GUN-LAW RULES FAR HILLS

HACK LEE said, "Yeah, they're comin' fer yuh." He stroked his mustache with a lean finger. "Natcher'ly, Mulligan an' Natty Blue are bringin' all o' Jollop down here. There's bound t' be a fight betwixt the two factions if I turn yuh a-loose."

Red Chandor sat in the sheriff's office. Della Lace was coming across from the hotel, hurrying. She wore a gingham dress and no bonnet

on her black hair. Red watched her graceful stride and said, "Like I say, Starrett and Craven and them won't fight. They're scairt of any man on a hoss with a gun. In their time they fought, but they got belongin's, now."

Hack Lee said, "A sheriff's got to git along with all kinds."

"I know," said Red reasonably. Della came into the office without slackening the drive of her headlong attack. Red said, "Now, Della, take it easy. Yuh got to look at things from all angles."

"I know they are coming in to lynch you!" she cried. "I've been to the townsfolk and they are barring their doors and getting ready to hide. They won't do a single thing to help. You've got to ride out of here."

"If he does, Mulligan'll shoot up the town. Then there'll be civil war in Jaguar County," said Hack Lee.

Della said, "What would you do, hold him and let them hang him?" Her cheeks were pink and her dark eyes blazed. She lifted one hand from the folds of the gingham dress. She said, "Yes, Sheriff, I know you would. You are a cold, hard customer. You know Red did not kill my brother, but you won't turn him loose. All right, Sheriff, look at this. Get his gun, Red."

The two men sat, stunned. In Della's hand was a short-barrelled revolver. It pointed steadily at Hack Lee.

The sheriff's hands went slowly up. He said, "Waal, if you take him by force—" He seemed resigned, but his pale eyes were curiously alive.

Red hesitated. Then he gingerly took the gun from Hack Lee's low-slung holster. He backed to the door and said, "Gringo around?"

Della said, "Out back, ready to ride."

Red said, "Okay. Hold him here." He slipped out of the jail building. Gringo was waiting, ears pricked back. Red went close to him, tied the dangling reins to the saddle horn. He whispered, "Go home, Gringo. Git!"

The horse pranced, snorted, then took off as though on wings, going cross-country by the back way. Gringo knew the way and would not stop until he had hit the home pasture, Red knew. He sighed, wondering if he had signed his death warrant with this act.

It was broad daylight, but people were busy barring their portals against the expected onslaught of Mulligan and his riders. Red stood in the shadow of the building, looking about. The jail was built of adobe bricks reenforced with heavy timbers. He glanced upward at the ridge poles, which extended a foot or two beyond the edge of the roof itself.

His face lighted. He walked to the jail, got a foot on the sill of a window and grasped the

bars. He stepped up and reached. The roof was low and he got a hand on the ridge pole. He swung under and out and his strong hands grabbed and he lifted himself onto the roof.

It was very hot, but the sun was slanting. He got to the chimney and hunkered down in its slight shade, tilting his sombrero against the western light. He lit a cigarette and waited, counting his scanty blessings and the five shells in the revolver he had taken from Hack Lee.

Red sat for an hour, thinking it out. He heard Della's voice below, and Hack Lee saying reasonably, "Yuh better lemme get another gun. I won't do nothin' to bring Red back. An' you know I wouldn't harm yuh."

Della almost sobbed, "You've let him go—and I might never see him again."

Hack Lee said, "Don't take on so, Miss Della. Things sometimes work out fer the best."

"Oh, you," she cried. "You—you politician!" She ran across the street to the hotel, the gun still in her hand. Red could just see her by craning from behind the chimney. He wished he had more ammunition.

TIME DRAGGED by. Hack Lee moved about in the jail below. Hack had no other prisoners just then. The sheriff seemed restless. Red kept his gaze on the road coming from the west.

The bank and the stores were closed and hastily boarded up. No one stirred in Far Hills. The town had gone underground. The fear of the riders from the cowboy town was something Red could almost smell, up on his roof post.

Hack Lee went out the back and stared in the direction Gringo had gone, the short out across country toward the ranches of Jaguar. Red flattened himself until the officer went inside again. He thought Lee was holding a scattergun in his hands but he could not be sure because he was afraid to look too close.

There was a thin cry, far in the distance. Red whirled to stare at a cloud of dust on the western road.

Crowns was coming, with Mulligan at its head and the satellite ranchers in the van. The lynching bee was on. Red stretched his legs, moved his arms in the shimmering heat, making sure his circulation was all right, ready for action. Five shells—he could take a quintet to hell with him. It was scant satisfaction when he thought of Della.

They came hurrahing into town, filling Main Street with the dust from their horses' hoofs, with their cowboy yips and yells. Mulligan raised a hand and they all settled down, milling about the jail, quieting their steeds.

Hack Lee's voice came up, without fear or haste. "Y'all are creatin' a hell of a disturb-

ance. Far Hills is worried t' death. You got no call t' do thet. Yuh better ride out, Tom."

"What's this I hear 'bout you turnin' Red Chandor a-loose?" demanded Mulligan.

Hack Lee said, "Well, he ain't guilty. But I didn't turn him loose. Della Lace put a gun on me and got him loose."

From across the street, Della's voice rang out, "That's right, Tom Mulligan. You want to do anything about that?"

A cowboy whooped, but Mulligan roared, "Quiet! Some of you better go take a look around town for Red."

Dev drawled, "His hoss is gone. I already looked."

Mulligan howled, "Hack, you let him git away. By God, I got a notion—"

A little silence fell incongruously upon the excited street. Then Hack Lee's voice said, in a monotone, "You're the big man, Tom. What you got a notion to start? Somethin' you kin finish, I hope."

Mulligan said, "You let a criminal go a-loose. No woman could take a man away you didn't want to go."

Hack Lee said, "She's holdin' a gun right now, in case yuh start somethin'. Why don't you jump her? Or send Natty Blue—he's the kind would jump a woman."

Red tensed, on the roof. There was a rider coming from across lots, and he was leading a horse. It was Gringo and the rider came close enough to be recognized as Will Blake.

Natty Blue's high voice said, "Be careful how you talk to me, Sheriff."

Hack Lee said slowly, "Waal, there was the chestnut hoss. Miss Della rode him into town today, innocent-like. Thet brand—it's an awful blotch. There is hardly anyone would know thet it read DD fast. But I mind when Red caught thet chestnut and tamed him an' added him to his cavy. Then he strayed and someone stole him. Then Cull Lace, knowin' the hoss was stole, blotched the brand agin and kept the hoss. He also knowed Red wouldn't do nothin' to him, on account of Della." Hack Lee had a smooth tongue for politicking and his voice was well oiled for a long speech.

Natty Blue said, "That kind of stuff is plain damned nonsense. Tom—let's get that killer and string him up and ignore the sheriff."

Hack Lee drawled, "It's kinda hard to ignore a sawed-off shotgun. And there's Miss Della with a rifle. Looks like you gents better jest hold still awhile."

Mulligan said dangerously, "Not for long, Hack. You can't hold us like this, not an army of you."

Hack Lee seemed to be listening. Will Blake came in with Gringo and dismounted behind the jail, spurs jangling. Out front the cowboys were muttering, waiting for

Mulligan to give the word. This was no motley crew to be tamed by a shotgun and a rifle in a woman's hand. Red moved from behind the chimney, the sheriff's gun cocked, going forward. Downstairs Will Blake, the nondescript man, walked through the jail house from back to front.

Hack said, "Long enough, Tom. Long enough to tell about the chestnut Miss Della thought Cull bought from Red for her to ride. Cull didn't buy thet hoss, Miss Della. He stole it from Natty Blue, who had stole him from Red."

Natty Blue shrieked, "That's a dirty lie."

Hack said without emotion, "Will Blake, here, is my deputy. Sort of a secret deputy sence all this trouble began brewin'. You folks scarcely notice Will, so he makes a fine man fer this work. Willy, what about the chestnut?"

Blake's dull voice said, "Sartain. Like you say, Hack. Cull use t' laugh at Blue 'bout it. I heard 'im."

Mulligan said, "Shut up, Natty. We ain't talkin' 'bout no stale ole hoss tradin's, Sheriff. We want a murderer and we're goin' after him."

Hack Lee said, "I was jest pointin' out a motive fer murder," said Hack mildly. "Natty hates to be laughed at. Yuh can do most anything to Natty and git away with it if yuh keep your face to him alla time, but don't laugh at him. He's plumb sensitive 'bout it, ain'tcha, Natty?"

Blue said, "You're a fool. You're a politticking fool."

Hack Lee said, "But not fool enough t' think Red Chandor kilt a man with a gun barrel when he could whup him left-handed. And not fool enough t' think Red Chandor left the murder gun in his house whilst he went south. And not fool enough to fail to send Will Blake, here, to El Paso to learn whose gun this is, anyways. It's got a cracked stock, see? It was bought by mail. It was sent here, second-hand, and it was never seen to be carried by Red Chandor, who has seldom toted iron, nor by anyone else, neither. And the reason it wasn't never seen is—"

From the roof, Red shouted, "Look out, Hack!"

Natty Blue was trying for a shot from his sleeve gun. He was sitting on a horse and trying to make it without moving very much.

Red threw down and fired. Natty Blue's hat went off, his head threw back and his face stared at the roof top. He essayed once more to get in a shot, this time at Red.

MULLIGAN'S gun was out, but he did not fire. The twin muzzles of the shotgun the sheriff held fixed him, ignoring all others. Red

was whirling for the back of the roof, whistling to Gringo. The well-trained horse edged close, and Red dropped to the saddle, balancing himself, sliding into the hull, sending Gringo around the edge of the building.

They stared at him and he stared back. Natty Blue lay where he had fallen and his horse was racking down Main Street. No one else seemed disposed to move. Hack Lee held the shotgun steady and Will Blake nursed a Winchester. Across the street Della did not waver, the rifle cradled in her arms.

Red said, "Looks like a Mexican stand-off. It's my turn to talk now, friends. I'm sayin' Tom Mulligan can think about Cull's murder. I'm sayin' Blue did it partly to please Mulligan. Crown owned Blue. Crown tries to own everyone in this county. Well, friends, it ain't healthy." Daniel Starrett and Jobe Craven had come cautiously from their hiding places. They saw the riders sitting silent beneath the guns of the sheriff and his deputy and grew bolder, crossing the street to take up places at the sheriff's side.

Red said, "Yuh can see it ain't healthy. It's plumb bad. An outfit owns too much, it wants to own too much more, there is bound to be trouble. Crown's all right. Dev, Slim, and the boys have only followed orders. I got ideas what's happened. But I'm ready to let it go, to stay here and live among my neighbors..."

The silence was profound. Mulligan's face was scarlet. He cranked his head around and stared at Della Lace. Her rifle was pointed straight at him.

Red said, "Tom, you and me have fought. I'll fight you again, any time. But you got to know you can't buy us out. I'm payin' off Della's share of Lace Ranch. I've got the cash in an El Paso bank, and I don't mind sayin' I borrowed part of it in Mexico. But I'm stockin' our both places and runnin' them as two outfits. That's fair. You keep to Crown; we'll keep to our homes. We can get along all right."

Mulligan could not find words to answer. He wheeled his horse slowly, however. His riders fell in behind him. They moved down Main Street, going west.

The smaller ranchers did not go with him. They remained, and their faces were turned to Starrett and Craven. Red said, "That's right. Borrow and pay Mulligan off. You can do it. This is a bumper year. I got top prices in Mexico for beef—that's a sign it'll be high here."

He rode Gringo across the street. He heard Hack Lee say to his deputy, "Nice work. I'm puttin' you on permanent, Will. Okay?"

"Sartain," said the deputy. He spat. He said, "Looky thet Red pick up thet gal. Trick stuff, ain't it?"

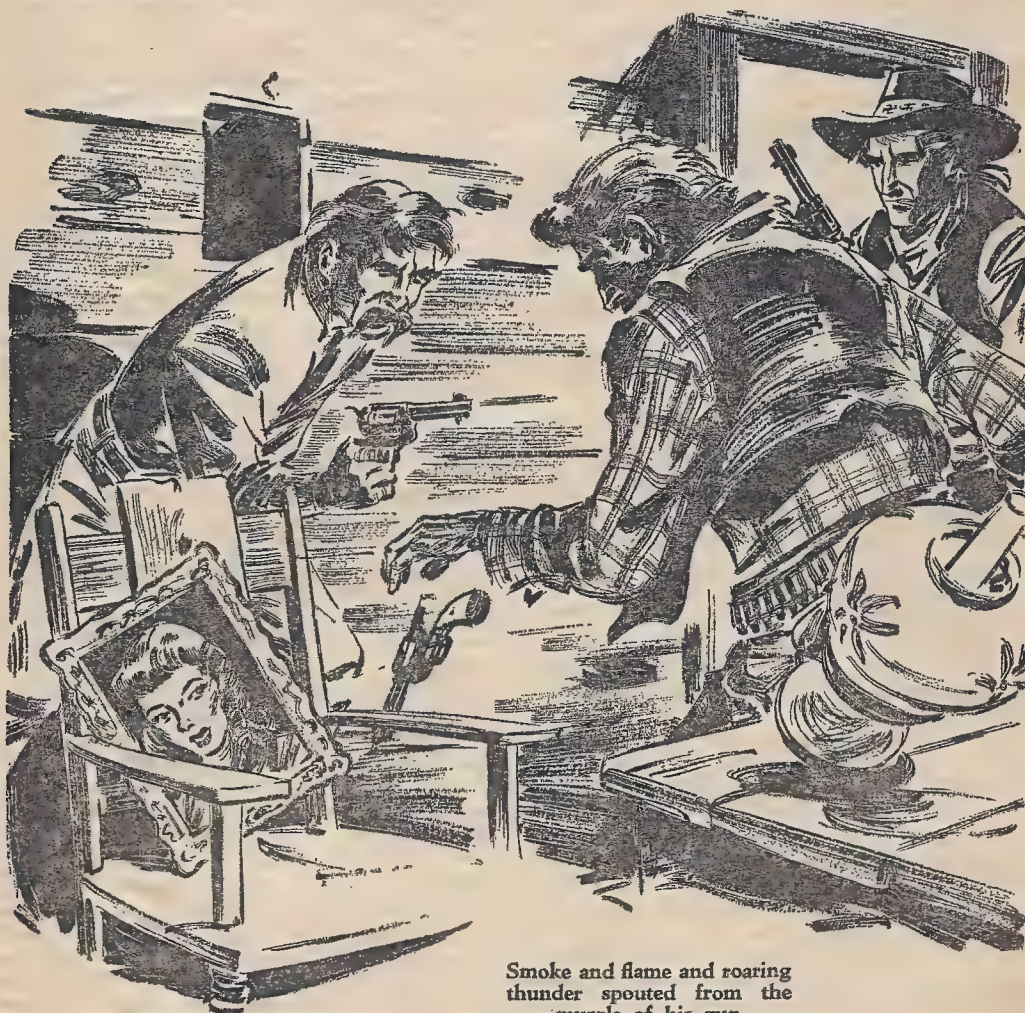
LAST TALLY

By GUNNISON STEELE

The road to Boothill became mighty crowded when old Sam Burns unlimbered the gun that had once blazed an owlhoot trail through the roaring frontier, and started doing a landslide business as a dead-shot usher for wayfarers to Hell!

THEY had Sam Burns cold, these hard-case hombres who had stopped at his cabin at Ute Springs an hour before. Same knew that, whatever happened before then, they meant finally to kill him.

Sam Burns was a wiry, mild-eyed little man, crowding sixty, with down-curling mustaches. Sitting there on the bunk, he regarded the two with a calm serenity that was tinged with regret. One of them, Cherokee Ralls, was tall, dark, with hawkish features and cold black eyes. Reno Red Tybee was blocky,



Smoke and flame and roaring thunder spouted from the muzzle of his gun.

red-haired, with pale cruel eyes. They were, they'd told Sam Burns at first, cattle buyers, and they'd kind of lost their way in this back country. They'd asked Sam if they could have a drink of water and a bite to eat.

Sam had mighty few visitors here at his little place on the edge of the Sunblaze Hills, so his cordiality was real enough. He'd cooked up a meal which the two had wolfed down. Now, suddenly, they had guns in their hands. "That was a pretty good feed, Burns," Cherokee said derisively. "Now we can get down to business!"

If Sam was surprised or scared he didn't show it. He wore no gun, and there was none in sight anywhere.

"So you're not cattle buyers," he said gently.

"We been called plenty things, but not that. Not cattle buyers, though we've dealt some in beef."

"What do you want here?"

"You'll find out soon enough. But just so we'll savvy each other right off, old man, we're not on speakin' terms with the law. There's big bounties on both our scalps. So you savvy we won't stand for any foolishness."

"If you figure to rob me, you're out of luck," Sam said. "I don't make much off here, just enough to live on—"

"We know all about you, so save yore breath," Cherokee growled. "For fifteen years, back yonder when you were younger, you rode the owlhoot trails. You were knowed as one of the fastest gents with a smokepole between Canada and the Rio Grande. You was hell-on-wheels with a cyclone tied to its tail. You stuck up banks and stages over half a dozen states—"

"No more than half a dozen in all—and then only when I was hungry."

"And I reckon you never killed anybody that didn't need killin'?" Reno Red jeered.

"I never killed but four men, and they all needed it bad. I winged a lot more, when I could have killed 'em just as well."

"Hogwash! Way I heard it, you beefed at least a dozen men with that fancy pearl-handled hog-leg you wore. Had a picture of a woman carved on the handle, didn't it?"

Sam nodded, a far look in his mild eyes.

"A girl. Her name was Rose. She was my wife. I had a little place there in Montana, and I'd built a fine cabin to take her to when we married. We'd been married less than a month when it happened. One night we heard somebody call out, and when I opened the door four riders were there in the moonlight before the cabin. They didn't say anything, just started shootin' into the cabin. The first two bullets knocked me down on the floor. Rose got hold of me and tried to pull me back into the cabin. Then the night-ridin' skunks shot her too. They killed her."

Cherokee Ralls scowled. "That's yore story, but I heard different."

"I'd recognized the riders there in the moonlight," Sam went on softly. "One of them was a big ranch owner named Bogart who'd been tryin' to crowd me off my strip, the three others rode for him. It was a month before I could walk, two more before I could fork a horse. I killed Bogart first, then the others, one at a time, all in fair fights. But it happened that this Sid Bogart had been as powerful as he was crooked. He owned the sheriff, prosecutin' attorney and all the rest. His son slapped a murder charge against me, and made it stick. So I took to the owlhoot. I had that picture of Rose carved on my gun handle so I wouldn't be so lonesome at night out in the badlands."

"You got me weepin' big tears," Cherokee sneered. "You think anybody'd believe that pack of lies. After the law caught up with you—"

"It didn't catch up with me," Sam denied. "I gave myself up because I was tired of runnin' and dodgin' and hidin'. I drew a ten-year sentence, and I served my time. Then I come down here to Arizona and started this little outfit. I've lived straight, and my neighbors respect me."

"We heard all about how you've got the wool pulled over folks' eyes. Honest and peace-lovin'. Don't even pack a gun any more, do you? Where's that fancy cannon with the girl's picture on the handle?"

"I put it away. I don't need a gun here."

"Old man," Cherokee said, "one of the men you killed nearly thirty years ago, was my daddy."

"I'd guessed that," Sam nodded. "You look a lot like he did then. Luke Ralls was his name. I recognized him there in the moonlight before he—"

"That's a cussed lie!" snarled the dark outlaw. "And you ain't got me fooled any. You ain't here in this gosh-forsaken hole for yore health. While folks on this range think you're just a harmless, dumb old coot, you're stealin' and robbin' 'em blind. You've got a regular gold mine!"

"What do you want?" Sam asked.

"First, some of the dinero you've taken off these suckers. You couldn't take a lot of money to the bank, because somebody might get suspicious. So you must have it cached somewhere about the place."

"And how about all that bank and stage loot?" Reno Red asked. "None of it was found when they sent him to Deer Lodge, so he must have had it cached. He'll have that here, too."

"There wasn't any stage or bank loot," Sam protested. "I never took more'n enough to buy grub—"

"Stop lyin', you ol' has-been!" Cherokee spat. "You aim to tell us where that cache is?"

"I never said there was a cache," Sam said quietly.

"You didn't have to! And we don't have to beg you—you'll do the beggin', before we're through with you."

He stepped forward, slapped Sam Burns across the face, knocking his head back against the wall. Sam was unarmed, and so offered no resistance. He looked up at Cherokee, a slight puzzlement and regret showing in his mild eyes.

Cherokee said wickedly, "You'll talk. You don't deny you've got a cinch here, do you, somethin' good as a gold mine?"

"Why should I deny it?" Sam asked quietly. "Sure, I've got a good thing here, somethin' better than a gold mine. And I don't aim to lose it."

Cherokee swore savagely, he shoved Sam back against the bunk and held him there helpless. Still Sam didn't fight back.

"Stick yore knife blade in that stove and get it hot, Red," Cherokee ordered. "We'll see whether or not he talks!"

Grinning with wicked anticipation, Reno Red obeyed.

"Lots of things you can do with a red-hot knife blade," Cherokee gloated, glaring down at the helpless oldster. "And don't think I won't enjoy workin' on you, for beefin' my old man. After I clean out that cache, I aim to collect back pay."

"**I—YOU WIN, boys,**" Sam said hoarsely, ten minutes later. "I can't stand no more."

The two owlhooters sucked in their breath greedily.

"Where's the cache?" Cherokee demanded angrily.

"I'll show you."

They released the wiry oldster and he sat up. His face was gray with pain, his eyes haggard and bitter.

"See that picture there on the wall, that picture of Rose? Behind it is a panel you can slide back, and you'll see a hole in the wall. That's it."

"Open it," Cherokee commanded.

Sam got up and crossed the room, his bare feet leaving blood stains on the floor, and paused before the framed picture of a young, smiling girl. The picture was no more than shoulder high. With unsteady hands Sam removed the picture from the wall and placed it on a chair.

An improvised panel several inches square was revealed. Sam removed the panel, leaving a dark hole in the wall.

Sam turned, misery in his eyes. "There's the cache. Help yoreselves to what little's in it."

"And maybe run our hands into a bear trap?" Cherokee said warily. "You better hand out the loot—pronto!" His hand moved suggestively to his knife.

The oldster sighed, turned and slid his hand into the aperture. And then, suddenly, Sam Burns was no longer just a wiry, soft-voiced, meek-eyed man who so hated violence that he refused to wear a gun.

He withdrew the hand, whirled, sent his body sideways in a cat-like leap, all in the same incredibly quick and coordinated movement. Smoke and flame and roaring thunder came spouting from the muzzle of the gun in his hand.

Cherokee and Reno Red, their guns already in hand, reacted swiftly and violently. Snarling with hate-inflamed fury, their own guns jerked up.

But Sam's act had been so unexpected, his fire so swift and deadly accurate, that they didn't have a chance. Four shots, each bullet placed where he wanted it, bellowed from his gun in such quick succession that it sounded almost like one giant explosion. Cherokee's one shot blasted into the ceiling as Sam's lead hammered him backward against the wall and to the floor. Reno Red broke in the middle and fell forward on his face like a man going to sleep. For a long moment, then, Sam stood there his eyes pensively regarding the bodies.

Coughing from the bitter gunsmoke that burned his nostrils, Sam Burns felt his way to the door and outside into the sunshine. He drew deep breaths of cool, sweet air into his lungs, an old regret dark and heavy inside him. He hadn't wanted to do this, but he hadn't been able to make Cherokee and Reno Red understand that there wasn't any money cache.

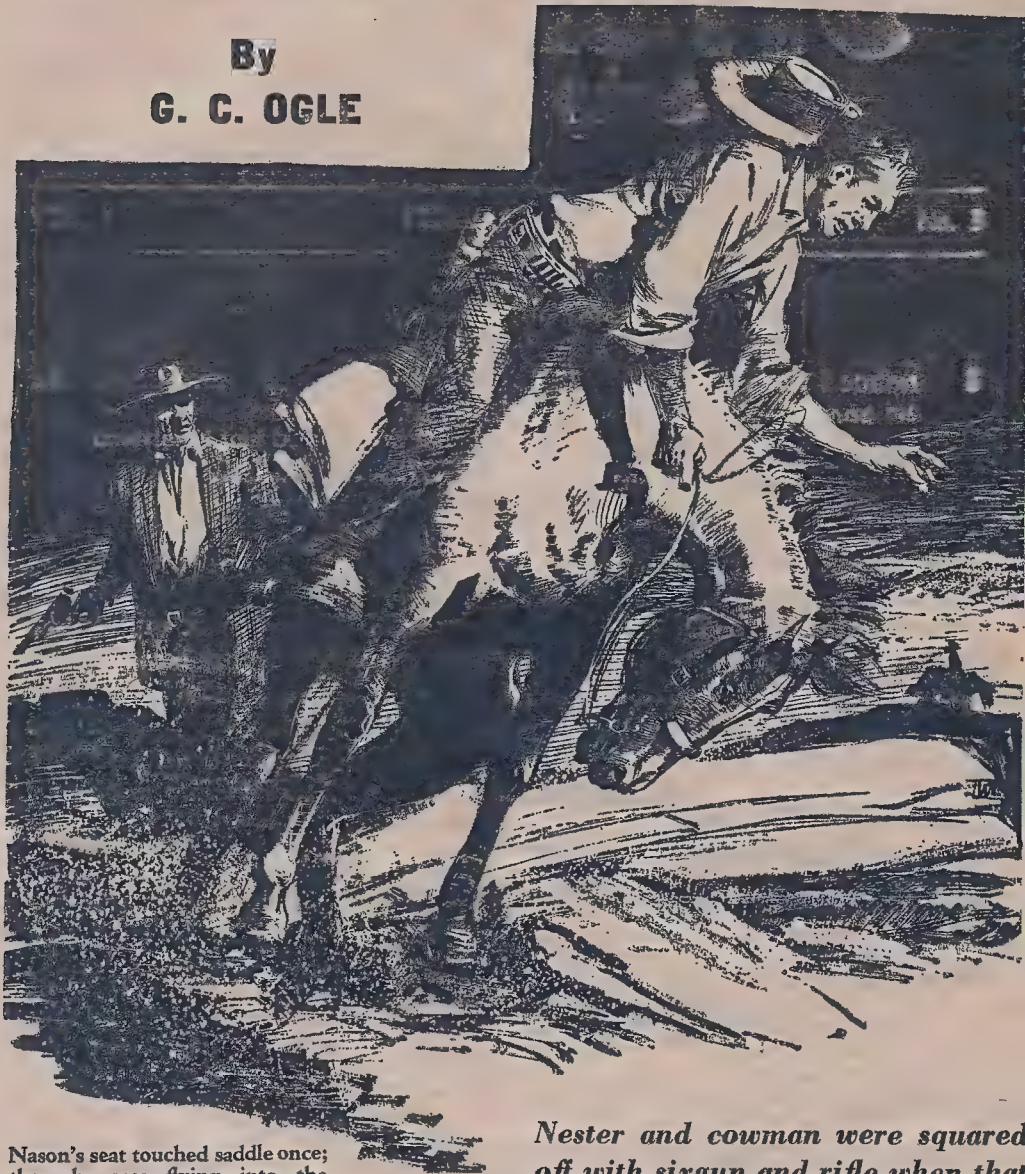
Maybe if he hadn't said, "Sure, I've got a good thing here, somethin' better than a gold mine."

But yonder was a stream of cold, clear water threading the fertile valley where cattle grazed in belly-deep grass. Yonder were dark pines, slender and graceful against the sky, the wind in their branches singing its endless song of peace and beauty. Beyond, gleaming cathedrals in the late sun, silver and gold and purple flames staining their crests, were the mountains. These things, along with the friendship and respect of honest neighbors, were worth more to Sam than all the world's gold.

The regret no longer in his eyes, Sam looked down at the gun in his hand. The pretty, sweet-faced girl on its pearl handle smiled up at him.

THE PISTOL PREACHMENT OF OBADIAH JONES

By
G. C. OGLE



Nason's seat touched saddle once;
then he was flying into the
darkness.

A NOON-TIME vertical sun shortened Reverend Obadiah Jones' six-foot-five shadow to a blob in the yellow dust when he arrived in Prosperity. He stood there a moment before Soapy Stone's saloon, big-boned and gauntly powerful, wiping the grime from his craggy face.

Nester and cowman were squared off with sixgun and rifle when that giant sky-pilot, Obadiah Jones, rode into the dust-dry streets of Prosperity to pray that drouth-ridden country into water, talk it into repentance, and shoot it into submission!

He listened to the clamor of voices flooding out through the open doors and windows. His short chin-beard, as fiery red as his tossing mane, crackled electrically. For the voices were edged with anger. It sounded as though hell were due to bust loose soon inside the saloon.

Obadiah's fierce blue eyes speared down the short street that bisected the forlorn little cowtown in Elk Horn Valley. The town lay there under a hot August sky, scorched close to lifelessness. For '87's drouth was a thing to remember.

The heat had pressed down relentlessly now for a hundred days. It was like a living, evil thing, that had been spawned in Hell and allowed to torment the helpless land, until the belief of men in God's mercy was shriveling.

Even Elk Horn's abundant water supply was failing. Only in Salvation Canyon did it still pool and trickle in quantity. And the Four 8's was threatening to fence off the gap that led to the parched and stricken valley from the canyon.

Sim Partlow ramrodded the Four 8's. It was a vast domain of canyon-slashed, rolling grasslands on the divide between the Powder River and the Applegate.

It had taken Obadiah two revivals and much personal persuasion to get the cattle king up to the mourner's bench. It looked now as if Sim had backslid a hell of a way to be breaking the Tenth Commandment already. He must surely covet the homesteads of the nesters to act so ornery.

So Obadiah was in Prosperity to drag Sim back from the brink of the Pit and avert the shedding of blood. It would surely be spilled if Sim fenced off the gap, for the settlers would try to cut the wire.

But Sim's cow prods were as loyal to him as a hound pup to a ten-year-old boy. If he posted them beyond the barricade with iron in their holsters, they'd use it when men tried to cut Four 8 wire. They'd have the law on their side, but it would be murder in Obadiah's eyes. For the settlers wouldn't have a chance—unless a good military leader set their ranks in order and deployed them properly.

The only sign of life Obadiah observed was the dozen droop-headed ponies dozing under a row of cottonwoods that leaned over the street in withered resignation—that and the angry voices in Soapy Stone's saloon. So he hitched the weary Stonewall to a tie rack by himself.

The claybank stallion, standing a full seventeen hands high, was caked with dust and steaming. Most cayuses would have dropped dead on the trail. For Obadiah had straddled him seventy hard miles since yesterday noon when he'd got word that hell was due to bust loose in Prosperity.

OBADIAH felt the heat seeping up through the soles of his cowhide boots as he tethered the jug-headed, vicious brute. Then his feet were pounding urgently on the steps leading to the saloon.

He felt no compunction about entering it. He walked into saloons every day without giving it a thought. Where his flock gathered, he went to tend it.

Obadiah felt a measure of relief as he stared inside through sun-narrowed eyes. For he spotted Sim Partlow leaning on the bar.

The cattlemen was a spare oldster with drooping white mustaches and a thin, lined face. The weather-beaten old hardcase with the bowed legs asked no puncher how his graze and herds stood the drought. He knew. He spent twelve-hours a day in the saddle. He had a booming bass voice and he had all the stops out as he bellowed in argument with a new-come nester Obadiah didn't know.

The nester was big—big and bulky. It began with his underpinning, big splay feet and thick calves that bulged over the tops of the low leather boots his gray trousers were stuffed into. Powerful thighs arched into a thick muscular torso. Over his broad belly the tallow was thickening from forty years of heavy eating. The cotton shirt open at the bull neck disclosed the deep chest. It was hairless.

So were the round cheeks with the network of withered lines. A battered Stetson was pushed back on the nester's black, bullet poll, and cunning black eyes were set beside the wide, flat nose. The mouth was also wide. But there was determination in the thin lips and in the stubborn chin.

"Lookit, Nason!" Sim bellowed. "For the last time, I'm telling you that your brainless, stinking sheep can't water in Salvation! What did you bring them into the valley for, anyway?"

Nason's voice was unctuous as he said smugly: "I am a shepherd of the Lord. He guided me and my poor flock to this fruitful vale. May they multiply abundantly under His blessing."

His hands were folded over his big belly and he rolled his cunning eyes piously. Obadiah felt his gorge against Nason rising. The fellow had no right to bring his sheep into a cattle country. But they were here. He'd have to make the best of it. Sim would likely agree to some reasonable settlement.

He hadn't backslid. Obadiah's heart felt lifted up. For when he put his brand on a maverick he wanted it to stay put.

"Let them multiply!" bellowed the exasperated Sim. "But the bleating critters can't pollute my cattle's water supply!"

"I have prayed unto the Lord," Nason said meekly. "He has told me my flocks shall water in Salvation. For here have I pitched my

tent, even as Isaac pitched his in the valley of Gerar. And let not the hand of the wicked be lifted against me, lest they be smitten, even as David smote the Amelkites from the twilight until the evening of the next day."

Sim's temper boiled over. He roared, "No sanctimonious son can quote Scripture at me! Now! Let's see you and David do something about this!"

He slapped Nason stingingly on the cheek! Angry red leaped on the hairless cheek and the big nester stumbled back. But Sim crowded after him, cuffing the nester with his open palm.

There were perhaps a score of men in the saloon. A couple were Four 8 line riders, the rest were nesters and townies set loose from the weekly grind by Sunday. Every eye was focussed on the humiliation Sim was piling on Nason.

As yet nobody had spotted Obadiah standing in the doorway. Indignation worked on his face. But not at Sim. For Obadiah wasn't one of the meek and lowly who expect to inherit the earth by turning the other cheek when slapped. The only man who'd ever laid hand to him was a drunken wife-beater who'd promptly receipted for a broken jaw as Obadiah's crushing fist drove him to the ground.

No. His anger was directed toward the giant Nason who was letting a little old gamecock like Sim slap him all over the place. It outraged Obadiah's sense of decency to see so powerful a man with so little spirit.

Now the fellow was whining, "Stop it, you man of Baal! I am a servant of the Lord."

Obadiah considered it plumb indecent to drag the Lord into such a piddling little fuss. Then Nason seemed to come to a powerful resolve. His cunning eyes searched around him. He saw he was pocketed in the angle between a card table and the wall. He said piously, "The Lord gives life and He takes. Forgive me, thy servant—"

And all the while he was fumbling at the .45 he had secreted in the waistband of his trousers inside the cotton shirt.

In the split second before Obadiah ducked his red head to go charging in through the door, or his lips framed words, he saw the whole scene. It was like motion suspended as his mind worked lightning fast.

Sim dropped back, his jaw sagging with surprise. He didn't go for his holstered iron—not yet. He just stared.

The two Four 8 hands were playing pedro for drinks with a couple of townies. They reared up fast. The table upset, cascading the cards and chips to the floor.

A couple of nesters perched on chairs and watching the game, fell out of the open window behind them. Others dropped to the floor.

Some of them stood staring like dumb oxen.

Soapy Stone stopped grinning his enjoyment as he leaned on his bar, watching Sim cuff Nason. He grabbed his bungstarter and came crowding out sideways like a bald-headed, benevolent porker going to war. The light of battle shone in his popped, dirty gooseberry eyes and his teeth were bared beneath the short-clipped brown mustache.

Still Nason fumbled with his gun. It seemed incredible that a man could take so long. And still Sim stared and waited. Obadiah wondered if he were going to stand there and do nothing, and why he couldn't shout the command that swelled in his throat.

The muzzles of the cow prods' iron were clearing holsters. But Nason's was out now, clenched in his big, hairless fist. It was swinging toward Sim. Then the oldster leaped sideways and went for his gun. Obadiah's voice roared, "Stop, you fools!"

A score of men swung to see him charging into the saloon with blazing eyes. Soapy belowed delightedly, "It's Jonesy! And am I glad to see the red-headed son! Now we can have a revival instead of a burying!"

His words were blurred by roaring six-guns. Obadiah counted them—three, quick-spaced shots from the door at the back which led to the rear through a short passage. Then there were two more, almost together, from the side of the room where Sim and Nason faced each other.

Powdersmoke clouded the room momentarily. But Obadiah had glimpsed the man framed in the door before it slammed. There were pounding footsteps in the passage, then the sound of galloping hoofs.

OBADIAH never forget a face. He promised himself grimly that he'd remember the lantern-jawed, lanky rannie who'd silently opened the door and spewed death into the room. Obadiah turned. The two Four 8 cowhands were clawing at the board floor with death glazing their eyes and lead in their briskets. Sim was down too, but he was alive and groaning.

No, Obadiah wouldn't forget the gunnie whose salt-and-pepper stubble beard vainly tried to hide the scar that welted on his jaw, even though he'd stared into those glittering black eyes for but the fraction of a second.

But now other things claimed his time. There was roaring confusion in the barroom until the panicked crowd erupted from the death-struck room. They went boiling out, jostling and crowding, through the windows and doors.

Obadiah didn't blame them. It is one thing to face death in the heat of conflict, and another to be struck down by chance lead in a barroom shoot-out.

There was silence then, broken only by Sim's groans and the clack of Soapy's bung-starter as he laid it on the polished bar. Slowly the powdersmoke cleared.

Obadiah's blazing blue eyes flicked over Nason. The big nester was staring down at Sim. A wisp of smoke curled languidly out of the muzzle of his .45. The big man's face wore a look of utter consternation, tinged with horror.

"May the Lord forgive me!" he groaned. "I've—I've reddened my hands with the blood of my brother. I—I never meant to. I only wanted to frighten the man of Baal who grievously afflicted God's servant."

But Obadiah had caught the look of gloating satisfaction on the lemon-colored, moon-face as Sim fell, then was quickly chased off. He bellowed furiously, "You've reddened your soul with blood, you whining hypocrite! But not your hands. Look!"

He pointed to the floor where Nason's lead had dug slivers from the planks. Sharp awareness glinted in the cunning eyes as the fellow stared at Obadiah fleetingly. Then he looked at the floor and humble thankfulness replaced the horrified look.

"May the Lord be praised!" Nason murmured devoutly.

Obadiah made no reply. He was afraid he'd said too much already. He felt a certainty that Nason and the killers were in cahoots. The big man would be the brains. He was dangerous.

Obadiah didn't know what they plotted. It would help him to find out if he pretended ignorance of the killer.

Soapy came squeezing out from behind his bar. He pumped Obadiah's hand vigorously, and cried delightedly, "Man, man, Reverend! You're sure a sight for sore eyes this blasted hot day! Will you be having a nip of Planter's Delight to rinse the dust off your holy tonsils?"

"Later, Soapy," Obadiah said absently. "Let's see what we can do for Sim."

He knelt beside the white-faced oldster, who lay with closed eyes. Sim opened his eyes, then. He grinned crookedly.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Jonesy, but there won't be six men walking slow for me just yet. The blasted nester got me in the shoulder. Guess I fainted, huh? The old constitution must be failing." He grinned wryly. "But I guess my boys downed the pious-talking son, Jonesy. I thought I heard shots. Did they stitch that nester's gizzard with lead?"

He stared up into Obadiah's face expectantly.

The red-headed preacher gently shook his head.

"They ain't dead?" Sim shouted incredulously.

Obadiah nodded sorrowful confirmation.

"That blasted—that nester downed my two boys too?"

Obadiah's silence was eloquent. Sim was galvanized into action. He had to clench his teeth to choke back the groans. But he sat up. And when his eyes clashed with those of the meek-appearing Nason, who still lingered, he scrambled to his feet cursing.

"So my boys didn't get you!" he bellowed. "But I will!"

He leaned down to pick up the sixgun he'd dropped, but Obadiah kicked it away and grabbed the nearly fainting oldster.

"Give me my iron!" Sim roared.

"Not yet, Sim. Pick it up, Soapy. And Nason, I want your gun handed over, too. We're done with gun-talk."

"Gladly, Reverend," Nason said unctuously, handing Soapy his .45. "I, too, have toiled in the Lord's vineyard. Nason's the name, sir. And yours?"

He extended his hand in fellowship.

"The Reverend Obadiah Jones," was the preacher's sour answer.

Obadiah ignored the extended hand. Presently it dropped heavily to Nason's side. No flicker of emotion betrayed the nester's chagrin.

OBADIAH'S religious tolerance covered all his flock. They were the cowmen and nesters who sprinkled the whole tier of cow counties north and south of the Oregon line. He rode herd on them vigilantly, warmly, understandingly. He married them and buried them, mended their harness and sharpened ploughshares, and even assisted at birthing them on occasion, when the midwife was late.

But politically he was still an unreconstructed rebel, even after twenty years in the west. For Obadiah had swung a flashing saber under Jeb Stuart.

Sim clutched the bar to stay upright and sneered, "You're a hell of a parson to ride herd on us folks. I thought you were a two-fisted man of God. But you're just like the other mealy-mouthed Bible punchers that never stayed more'n a week!"

"Why, Sim?" Obadiah asked mildly.

"Because you won't let me down that blasted sheepherder who stands there grinning after killing my two men!"

"Soapy, break Nason's gun open," Obadiah commanded.

Soapy let the cartridges slip out of the cylinder into his fat palm. Obadiah pointed to the one empty shell.

"One slug didn't kill two men and nick your shoulder, Sim. Besides, it's there in the floor."

"Then who did down them?" the staring Sim demanded.

"I don't know yet," Obadiah replied. "But

I aim to find out with the help of Nason."

"Him?" snorted Sim. "He's a nester, ain't he? So will he give away one of his breed? Don't try to make me swallow that, Jonesy!"

"He'll help me," Obadiah replied confidently.

He expected the big man's help to be given mighty unwillingly, but by publicly numbering the big man with the just, he'd throw him off guard if he was siding the scar-faced rannie secretly.

"I shall pray for help," Nason said. "And the prayers of the meek are answered."

"They are, hey?" Sim sneered. He rubbed his stubbled jaw reflectively. "Um—all right. Start praying. And pray for water! Because I'm going to fence off that gap, and it'll stay fenced until you produce the snake-bellied skunk who downed my boys!"

He smiled in savage enjoyment. Obadiah was watching Nason. He caught the triumphant gleam that shone out of the nester's eyes. Then the heavy lids drooped.

So that was it. Nason wanted the gap fenced off. But why? His band of sheep would die along with the homesteader's cattle. It didn't make sense on the face of it.

Obadiah figured the answer lay in Nason's cunning brain. But he couldn't read it—not yet. He might later. In the meantime the crisis he'd hoped to avert was on him, for Sim absolutely refused to change his mind. All Obadiah's reasoned arguments went for naught. But he stuck to his guns while he pulled off his coat and dressed the cattleman's wound.

Obadiah figured the argument helped Sim through the painful ordeal. The oldster got so angry he was bellowing at the preacher during the tough times, as he sat in his chair, clenching the arms with white-knuckled hands.

Obadiah got a little angry too. It showed in the flaring red spots on his gaunt cheeks and in his flashing blue eyes.

Nason said nothing. He only waited, meek and humble.

Then it was finished. Obadiah leaned against the bar. He towered over the stumpy Soapy and topped the big Nason by three inches. But he had disproportionately long legs, and his big-boned wrists thrust down below the sleeves of his black frock coat that the passing years had faded to green.

It generally astonished the beholder to see Obadiah settle into the rope sling beneath a Stillson scale and balance the bar at two hundred twenty. For he was narrow in the shoulders and hips, with a flat, hard slab of a belly. But his big bones were knit together with powerful muscles and his chest was deep.

Soapy set out glasses and a bottle of bourbon. Obadiah poured a generous slug as Nason watched in pretended amazement. The

preacher said sourly, "I do nothing secretly, hoping even the Lord won't be looking. There is no more sin in using Soapy's good bourbon, taken in reason, than there is eating. Gluttony is a sin though, in both."

He stared meaningly at Nason's lardy belly as Soapy snickered. Then he tossed off his three fingers, turned, and picked up Sim in his big arms.

Obadiah argued with Sim all during the ride to the Four 8's. It lasted through most of the night, for both were stubborn men. Sim kept repeating with many variations his challenge that Obadiah produce the killer. "Then I'll take my wire down," he'd finish.

"But the settlers' cattle will die within a week if I don't find him! What about them? And what about your own soul, you stiff-necked old son?" was the boiled-down gist of Obadiah's eloquent pleading.

"I'm in good hands," Sim grinned. "You'll keep right on interceding for me—even if I am a stiff-necked old son."

Obadiah had to admit to himself that this was true. Sim went even further, saying slyly, "You might pray, Jonesy, to have your flock delivered from the drouth. Nason allows how the prayers of the meek are answered. But—ahem—nobody could accuse you of being meek. So I guess it's no dice. But no harm in trying."

"Silence, you impious old sinner!" Obadiah roared in righteous anger. "If you weren't a sick man I'd stuff your words down your throat with my knuckles! The wise man doesn't ask God to go against the laws of Nature. Instead, he asks for wisdom, so he can live within the bounds she sets!"

Obadiah started to stamp off angrily to bed. Sim's guffaw followed him. Then, at the door, he stopped. He stood staring. A startling idea had come to him. Maybe his silent plea for wisdom in the present crisis had been answered already.

He couldn't be quite sure yet. But—

The whole lay of Elk Horn valley unrolled before him. Maybe Nason had the same idea. If the fellow was trying to buy more land—

Soapy would know. He turned back and said exultantly, "If I deliver the valley from the drouth, will you promise to repent—and stay that way?"

"Sure will," Sim grinned. Then he sobered, and said, "Jonesy, don't do it! You know well's I do that it'll be six weeks before the equinoctial storms break the drouth. Blast it, man! Do you want those nesters to lose their faith in you? You'd sure look silly praying for rain now. It just can't happen!"

"Nevertheless, I shall pray tomorrow for the valley to be delivered from drouth if the signs are propitious!" he said triumphantly. "You will come?"

"If they have to carry me. What time?"

"At noon, if I feel moved."

Sim's eyes were troubled. He thought bitterly, "I'll have to cut the wire in the finish. Maybe that's what that red-headed fanatic is banking on. But by the hammerlocks of Hell, I'll make them sweat first! Maybe if Jonesy can't move the equinox ahead, they'll rear up and chase that blasted Nason out of the country."

THE TWO murdered cowhands were laid to rest in the Four 8 burying ground the following morning. Then Obadiah slapped his rig on Stonewall.

He stepped aboard the claybank stallion that had never been straddled until he was seven years old. Few buckaroos had straddled the horse since Obadiah himself had gentled him. None had remained on his ornery back longer than twenty seconds.

The jug-headed brute flattened his ears meanly and instantly left the ground. He pitched high and handsome and came down stiff-legged and bawling his rage. But Obadiah's leather-booted calves were gripping his flanks like a vise.

The stallion recognized the futility of the never-ending feud between himself and his master. Each time Obadiah stepped aboard he bucked—then speared off at a dead run.

Obadiah let him ramble down the trail that led to Salvation. It always lifted up his heart to feel the wind of their passing cool his craggy, big-nosed face, as Stonewall laid his belly to the ground and worked off his excess energy.

Obadiah was fiddle-footed. He could have had his choice of a dozen good pastures. Instead, he chose the half-tamed rangelands where he was always on the move.

Now he snugged his stiff-brimmed, black range hat tight to his flaming red poll and lifted up his sonorous baritone in a song of Christian triumph.

Both he and Stonewall were fresh as dewed daisies after their night's rest, but there were neither daisies nor dew in Salvation. Instead, there came gusty puffs of hot air sucking up the canyon. The valley would be an oven by noon. It looked like a poor day to pray for rain. But the distant equinox had no part in Obadiah's plans.

Instead, he rode up the canyon a piece and surveyed its walls. They were mostly shale that pitched steeply down to the bedrock furrow in the fold of the land. Here and there the granite was exposed. And always on its smooth surface there was moisture. Maybe but a seep, sometimes a small trickle.

Now Obadiah knew why Salvation never failed. He closely observed the rising angle of the bedrock beneath the shale. Then he

rode up through the gap. Sim's crew were already setting posts and stringing wire. In another hour the gap would be closed.

"Tell Sim the signs are right!" Obadiah called.

"Sure, Jonesy," the foreman replied. "We'll all be there to watch you strut your stuff. I'm wearing my slicker, too."

The men laughed good-naturedly. Evidently the news had run ahead of Obadiah.

Already, cattle drifting down the valley for their morning watering were bunched up where the wire crossed the trail. They stood there and stared down the canyon and bawled. Mostly they were gaunted bone-bags. They were too listless to switch the flies that clotted their backs or to horn a crowding new-comer. They just stood there with that hopeless look in their soft brown eyes and bawled tiredly.

There were buzzards sailing in wide-looping spirals in the brassy sky. As Obadiah rode up the valley he watched them dropping lower. Below the circling carrion eaters, an old cow whose strength was drained by the late calf she suckled, staggered along a dried-up stream bed. There wasn't a drop of moisture in it—only a dirty, whitish-gray scum that had hardened until it crackled under her tottering hooves.

Presently she pitched forward on her nose and stretched out with a wheezing sigh. Obadiah knew she'd never stand again. He rode up close and ended her suffering.

He couldn't prevent the buzzards from picking her bones. But at least they wouldn't pick her eyes out before she died. He holstered his .45 beneath the skirt of his black coat and rode on.

Sorrow softened Obadiah's fierce blue eyes. That was what troubled him most: the suffering of the stock and the women folk—those who gave life. Always they suffered the worst when drouth and famine struck.

But if the Lord held his hand a little while, drouth would never again lay its blight on Elk Horn valley.

When Obadiah questioned Soapy he learned that Nason had made offers for several homesteads. Now it made sense to him why the big man wanted the gap shut. He was trading his pitiful band of sheep for a thousand acres that would green under the magic touch of water.

But Soapy couldn't identify the scar-faced gunny who'd thrown sudden lead through that back door. He had to be a hired gun-swift Nason had fetched, knowing he'd have use for him.

A GAIN Obadiah stood on Soapy's front porch. It was noon. He gazed down into the expectant faces of almost all of Elk Horn Valley's population.

Benches had been brought. The sunbonneted women in faded calico dresses sat under the shade of the cottonwoods. Fretful babies whimpered. Barefooted kids stared up solemnly, wise beyond their years in the fierce struggle for existence. The men stood in clumps—all but Nason. Meek and humble, he had a front seat.

And behind them all, Sim Partlow and his gun-toting cow prods sat saddle in a semicircle. The nesters greeted them with surly looks. There was a tension in the air. It needed but a spark to flare into violence.

The audience forgot Obadiah's ungainliness when he preached. Zeal burned in him like a fire; it blazed in his blue eyes and crackled in his flaming-red chin-beard. His voice was sonorous, rolling thunderously or stinging like a popping whip; then it would gentle, become pleading.

He always brought a powerful message. When he preached one of his Hellfire and brimstone sermons and called upon the sinners to repent, they came crowding up like thirsty cattle.

"You know," he began, "how grievously the Lord has afflicted this valley. It is not for us to ask why. It is rather for us to come humbly, beseeching deliverance. This we will do today."

"Amen!" Nason bawled piously.

Obadiah stared down at him acidly. He said, "First, let us ask for wisdom."

His prayer was short, for he had compassion for the teething babies and the patient folk broiling under the sun. At the finish, Nason's Amen again rang loud.

"Now we turn to the Bible to find out what folks did in olden times when afflicted by drouth. Let me read from Kings, II, Chapter three. '... and they fetched a compass of seven days journey: and there was no water for the host, and for the cattle that followed them. ... Then he (Elisha) said: "Thus saith the Lord: Make this valley full of ditches. For thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water, that ye may drink, both ye, and your cattle, and your beasts."'"

The crowd gazed at Obadiah in puzzled wonder. Sim Partlow grinned sadly and tapped his forehead with a stubby forefinger.

"Nobody home," he grunted. "The heat's got him—or why would he be gabbing about water filling ditches when there ain't none?"

Only Nason seemed to get the idea. He sat crouched now, staring at Obadiah between the spread fingers of his two hands. He offered no Amen. Obadiah spoke directly to Partlow.

"Your point is well taken, Sim. But neither did Elisha have water. He produced it without either rain or wind. How? Most likely he dug wells. *And so will we!*"

"By the hammerlocks of Hell!" boomed Sim. "I've been outsmarted again by that red-headed son."

A lanky homesteader reared up, and complained: "But, Reverend, I dug a well thirty feet a couple of years ago. Nothing but yellow clay—and it'll take maybe ten days to dig one. Anyway, who's got a pump if we do find water? Or are we going to bail it out with a dipper?"

"I'm not surprised you didn't find water," Obadiah replied coldly. "You probably dug on a rocky knoll, hoping you wouldn't. But if you'd gone ten feet deeper you'd have struck the water sands that clay seals in! This valley is a natural drainage way—that's where the water in Salvation comes from! So I'm going to drive a well straight through it and artesian water will come gushing out by dark tomorrow night. Now! I want volunteers. For it will take sweat as well as prayer to punch a hole through that clay!"

One of the nesters had a forge and anvil. There Obadiah fashioned his point, a steel cone eighteen inches long and four inches thick at the base. To the center of this he welded his first length of two-inch pipe which was punched full of holes near the bottom to admit the water when the pipe entered the underground stream. The whole thing resembled a cumbersome spear.

Then an old woman who had the gift witched for water. Holding a forked willow twig before her, she slowly paced across the valley. Her elbows were pressed to her sides and the tips of her fingers gripped the slender forks. The nails of her fingers were up and her thumbs stuck out at right angles from her hands.

As she slowly paced forward, the fork would dip from time to time. Then, near the center of the valley it pulled down harder and harder until the grip of her finger tips tore the very bark from the twigs!

"Dig here!" she ordered.

So Obadiah started his well there. He'd intended to, anyway, figuring it was the natural place. But he wasn't one to overlook a helpful sign.

He climbed on his platform then, spat on his hands, and dropped his maul on the top of the pipe. The point down in the bottom of the hole that had been dug the depth of a spade handle, sank deeper into the hard yellow clay. Then another man climbed up and the two swung their mauls powerfully. They were spelled by eager men, who in turn tired and were followed by others all through the waning afternoon and into the cooler night.

Faint dawn was graying the sky when Obadiah again climbed to his platform. He'd sent his last two tired volunteers home. In an hour, rested men would return.

Obadiah had a sense of foreboding, although the well was approaching the forty-foot depth where he expected to strike water.

He wondered where Nason and his gun-swift were. The big nester had disappeared immediately after Obadiah announced his intention of driving a well and hadn't been seen since. He'd expected the fellow to throw obstacles in his way, try to dishearten the home-steaders, do something to slow him up.

NOW IT was too late. In another few hours, maybe sooner, the pipe would gush water.

But was it too late? It was a dark night, and Obadiah was alone. If the two jumped him with iron in their fists—

They were as ruthless as a pair of wolves. He felt a shiver of apprehension and wished he hadn't sent all the men home. Then he was ashamed. The Lord would side him.

In the distance he heard the clink of a pony's hoof stumbling against a flint. Obadiah slid down from the platform and brought the holster of his long-barreled Colt further forward on his lean thigh. He wasn't one to put all the work on Him. He had the weak and helpless to look after—like that fool nester who'd dug thirty feet and quit, to let his kids lug water from the branch.

Obadiah crouched behind the platform. The pony came closer. But no friendly hail floated out of the dark. The rider was acting mighty suspicious.

Obadiah's .45 cleared leather and he challenged: "Halt or I'll shoot!"

He was taking no chances. That well was going to be finished.

"Don't shoot, Jonesy!" a voice called. "It's me . . . Soapy Stone. Heard you were alone.

So I came down to sit with you till daylight. Wouldn't want no dry-gulcher slipping up on you."

A surge of relief floated over Obadiah. It was sure thoughtful of Soapy to ride down.

Then red and orange muzzle blooms were stabbing through the gray gloom as fast-triggered sixguns roared behind Obadiah.

He felt splinters kicked in his lean cheek from the platform post as he hunted the ground and swung his long body behind the wooden shelter.

Soapy's pony screamed in death-struck agony. Obadiah heard it smash to the ground, but he didn't hear even a groan from his friend's lips. He guessed the stumpy fat man was a gone gosling.

Obadiah burned powder sparingly. He only had the five loaded shells in his cylinder, having used one to end the cow's suffering. But he loosed a couple to let the rannies know he was in the game.

He didn't want to down them unless he had to, to save his own life and protect the well. Help would come at daylight. He could hold them off until then, he figured.

He had no lingering doubt as to who his early visitors were after the first echoes came clapping back from the near hills and the gun-talk quieted.

He could hear Nason cursing, "We didn't get the blasted, red-headed son, Scarface! Now those nesters will be down on us like a swarm of bees. What are we going to do?"

"You tell me, Nason," sneered Scarface.

"We'll separate," Nason explained. "Come in from opposite directions fast with guns hammering."

(Continued on page 128)

Triple Fiction-Treat for February!

1. PRAIRIE PIRATES OF THE BIG MUDDY!

By Norman A. Fox

Adventure aboard a hell-bound Missouri riverboat!

2. GUN-GUARDS FOR THE DEVIL'S DRIFT-FENCE

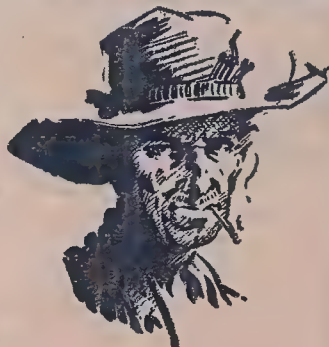
By Joseph Chadwick

Ranch warfare in the midst of the devil's own blizzard!

3. THE COFFIN-FILLER'S SYNDICATE

By Barry Cory

Gunplay in the City of Missing Men!



ALSO, DRY WELLS REBELS, a complete novelette by D. B. Newton, and a smashing trio of short stories by Giff Cheshire, Sebastian Brand and Kenneth L. Sinclair. . . . All in the big new February issue, which goes on sale December 27!

15¢

THE COWBOY'S MAGAZINE

Ace-High
WESTERN
STORIES

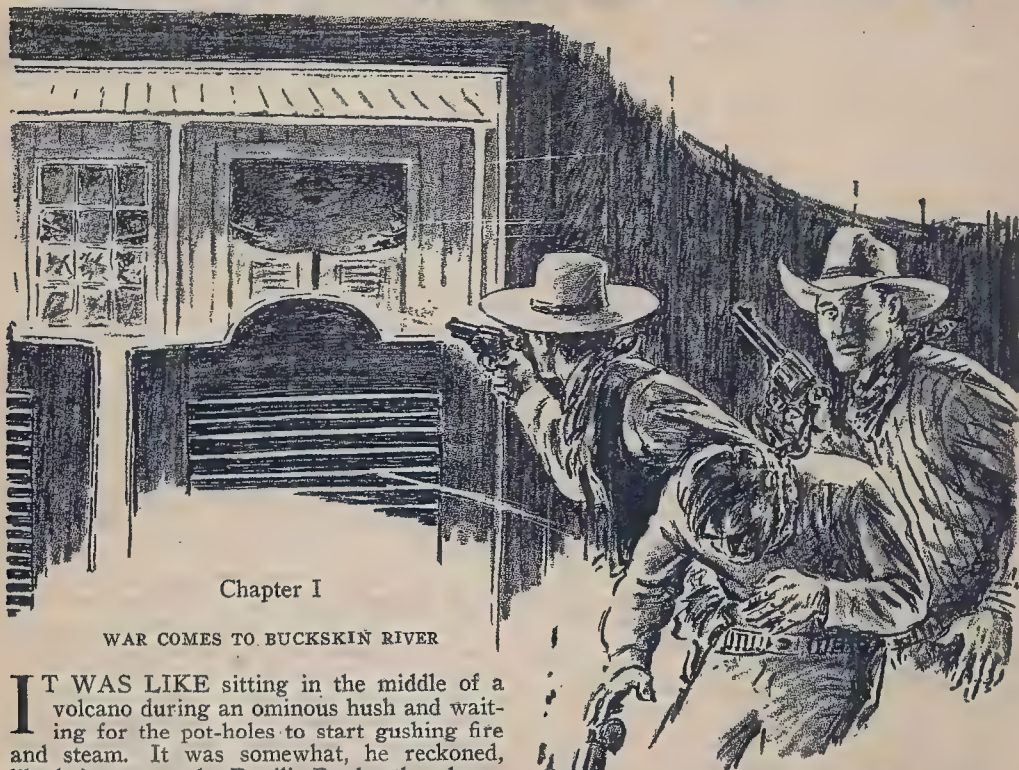
*Gunsmoke Epic of a Lawman who Tallied
Himself as King of Hell!*

By TOM ROAN



Gun-thunder rocked the streets of that little cowtown as Crazy Boners, Hatfields, and Rafter Arrow men sent red hell hurtling around the ears of Highlander and Drinkwater men. . . . Until a bunch of kill-hungry renegades caused those feuding cowmen to unite their guns in one grim purpose: Death to every shoot-in-the-back son who belonged to the Buckskin River Cattle Pool!

BUSHWHACK DAY AT BUCKSKIN RIVER



Chapter I

WAR COMES TO BUCKSKIN RIVER

IT WAS LIKE sitting in the middle of a volcano during an ominous hush and waiting for the pot-holes to start gushing fire and steam. It was somewhat, he reckoned, like being up on the Devil's Bugles that day—high up in the lofty mountain ranges of Horsethief Range—waiting for the gunfire to start when the six outlaws had him surrounded, his horse shot from under him, and one of the wildest winds that ever blew sweeping across the great backbones of the Rockies.

Only here there was no wind, just waiting, knowing that it was coming. Yet Sam Easy was making no apparent move, lifting no hand, saying not one word to stop it. He was merely sitting there on the lean-to jailhouse porch at the head of the street, a tall, tired figure in shabby gray, his old hat pulled low to shade pale eyes from the mid-morning sun that poured down on him, a six-shooter on each hip, a little black shepherd with four white feet sleeping in fits and starts under the tilted-back chair. No one, of course, could guess that he had a sawed-off pump gun hidden behind the jamb of the door just to his right.

But after all, he reckoned, there were some things that were not made to be stopped by any sheriff. Buckskin River was getting set to blow itself all to hell, and no one man was going to prevent it—not the spilling of blood, anyway.

Charlie Drew was going down then, staggering into a direct line with the doorway.

For weeks he had been riding, night and day, right through from the middle of hot July to late September. He had killed one horse, had almost killed six more on lonely dark trails in his desperate attempt to make men see the light of common sense and hold things down. He had covered every detail for eighty miles around in this tall-mountain country, half the time taking his life in his hands, and almost losing it that night his horse drowned in the deep channel of a river.

Most of these people were his friends in one way or another, and yet they were all killers when aroused, some sneaky mean, apt to drop a man from behind a rock, others ready to charge head on like a grizzly at the drop of a hat. Many had greeted him in the same old way, grasping his hand and slapping him on the back, their women and children ganging up around him. Others had been sullen. Sometimes he had had to stand and swallow an old-fashioned cussin' out. A man could not

knock another man's jaw off with the fellow's wife standing right behind him.

But it had been no good, not one bit of it. When the people in this Skyland Range Country wanted to fight, all hell was not going to hold them, even if a sheriff they were supposed to listen to rode himself into a sheath of corns and saddle blisters from his tailbone clear to the backs of his ears.

Right at the moment Buckskin River was so quiet he could hear his old gold chime watch ticking in the lower right-hand pocket of his vest, and even the river seemed to be holding off in its constant rumbling in its rocky gorge. Maybe the river knew it—and most certainly the dogs knew, in that uncanny way of the brutes, that this ungodly peace and quiet could not last. Every last one of them had deserted the doorways down the street.

It was in the restlessness of little black Boots trying to sleep under the chair. Every now and then she lifted her head with one of those queer starts and looked up to make sure he was there. Boots knew! Boots could always guess ahead of time when guns were going to blaze, when the doors were going to bang, half of them in town already closed, and when horses would snort and men would yell and curse, with all of Buckskin River thrown into a sudden uproar!

After it was over there would be women crying and children wailing in several places in these wild Montana hills, valleys and mile-deep canyons. It seemed that the women and kids always caught it, always had to shoulder the load and the hurt. Man, the damned fool, just got himself killed, just got shot, pitched over and died, and that was all there was to it, no pain, no sorrow. He left that part to his widow.

It was Saturday, always the worst day, with trouble brewing in the cow country and already gone beyond words in a dozen places. The Allan gang had come galloping in, pounding down off Storm Divide, the great range to northward. Swinging past the jailhouse, so close their right stirrups had almost touched the end of the porch, they had thundered on down to the hitchrack in front of the Queen of Hearts, a few doors above the bank.

HELLFIRE Buck Allan himself had been at the head of the eleven well-armed cowboys. A long and lean old devil in black on an iron-gray, Buck was not the kind to fool a fellow. He had come in with a Winchester slung by his saddle and a Peacemaker at either hip.

Allan had looked neither to the right nor left, keeping his hard black eyes straight ahead, the lean, close-shaven face long and grim despite an over-smearing of white from his wife's flour barrel. Only a couple of his riders out of

the wild and woolly lot had bothered to glance in on the porch. The two that had glanced in had that sullen, what-yuh-gonna-do-about-it look in their eyes.

Now dust was soaring up in a wild cloud and crawling high against the bushy cottonwoods on the old stage trail to Crazy Creek, the little railroad town forty miles away. That dust meant the Drinkwater crowd, probably led by Old Luke. Sam Easy even hoped that it would be Old Luke, short, ruddy-faced and gray-mustached. Anybody but Cockeyed Ike, Luke's crazy son!

Luke was smooth, usually cool. Sometimes a man could make him see a point without having to wrap the barrel of a Frontier .45 around his head, even when he was three sheets to the wind on Rocky Mountain Honey, the meanest, rawest whiskey an 'uncarin' cuss could pour into his guts in the Saddle Rope & Spur, almost straight across the street from the Queen of Hearts—and both tougher than whang-leather of late.

Cockeyed Ike had little enough sense when sober, and nary a whit when coked to the eyes.

When the Drinkwater bunch came into sight Sam Easy's eyes narrowed and his long face tightened.

Luke was there, all right, pounding along on his tall white Rattle-bone, but Cockeyed Ike was there also, mounted on a splendid black and dressed up like some fancy Spanish dancer, his expensive guns bristling, big Mexican saddle all aglitter with silver trappings.

"Which means Luke's drunk, leastwise nearly popped, anyhow." The sheriff's voice appeared to come through his nose, pale eyes drawing into thin pin-points. The little dog under the chair got up to go inside the dingy jail office. "He promised fair an' square to keep Ike outa town if I wouldn't look 'im up last week, an' he ain't never a hand to lie unless he's been suckin' at a bottle."

But it really mattered little, after all. Cockeyed Ike was deep—all the way to the ears—in this quarrel that was bringing Buckskin River into war. It had been Ike who had gone back east last fall with close to a trainload of young beef cattle. It had been past Christmas before he had returned, needing a shave and a haircut, his fancy pockets empty, a beaten-dog look in his long dark face. Busted flatter'n hell, everybody knew, after seeing Kansas City's highlights!

Soon after Ike's return, people had started to know Mr. Julian Brady and Mr. Horth Shell, two dark, strong and thick-set men in hard hats, both fond of black cigars half as long and big as a calf's leg. Brady and Shell had turned up within two weeks after Cockeyed Ike's return, and had taken rooms in the Owl Head Hotel.

It was then that the big talk of the cattle pool had started.

Buzzard-faced old Rice Grant, down at the bank, had soon joined the idea, whole soul and body, with Roosh Hendry of the Saddle Rope & Spur pitching in. Then Judge Seth Scully, Gage Lantry, and about a dozen others, including Cockeyed Ike who had dragged in Old Luke, and finally the entire south side of the country had gone in.

Robbed of Cockeyed Ike, the scheme might have taken fire all the way to beyond Storm Divide. All a cowman had to do was to pool his cattle with the rest of the cowmen in the country and ship them to Brady & Shell, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri, and Brady & Shell, Inc., would do the selling, getting the tip-top prices right there on the ground. Then Brady & Shell, Inc., would send everybody a check—and everybody would be rich, well and happy!

"But there was one thing what jarred me," Buck Allan had complained. "One of them damn' fools, right about when he had me sold on the idea, had guts enough to ax how many offspring I expected from my steers next comin' spring, an' then an' there, I blowed higher'n hell's low. Only Washington, itself, could send out a fella who wouldn't know that there ain't been a man in the world who's ever even heard of a steer havin' a calf!

"Not only that," he had raged on. "When they saw I was mad, it was hinted that a lot of bad things might happen to my Rafter Arrow stuff if I didn't jine up. Hell, it was even hinted that some mad cowman might take a shot at my wife or daughter—an' that's why I'm comin' out to fight, hoof an' nail!"

Nor was Buck Allan going to have to wait long. The Drinkwater crowd was already hitting the foot of the street, the hoofs of sixteen horses a clatter fierce enough to awaken the dead; and up there in the bank old buzzard-faced Rice Grant and his close-knit crowd—including Mr. Brady and Mr. Shell—probably had the door of the vault open and were ready to jump inside and yank the door closed behind them at the first crack of a gun.

But Sam Easy still waited, every nerve calm. As if just to prove it to himself, and he really had no thought of proving anything, he took out the makings and started rolling a smoke. His hands and fingers were like iron, no hint of a quiver, not a crumb of tobacco wasted.

No crazy, cattle-pool war was going to jar Sam Easy, especially when it was started by Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater and a couple of tin-horn slickers who did not have sense enough to know a steer from a cow!

AS USUAL, it was the big-mouthed Cockeyed Ike who started the ball rolling. Seeing Rafter Arrow horses at the hitchrack in front of the Queen of Hearts, he was yelling

like a maniac many rods before the Drinkwater crowd charged up to the Saddle Rope & Spur's long, oak-log rack.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah for the cattle pool!"

Old Luke and a couple of big cowpunchers had dragged him out of the saddle and on inside. For fifteen or twenty minutes they had kept him there, evidently watching him, and then he was back, wilder than ever, both hands cupped to his mouth, howling toward the Queen of Hearts.

"Hurrah for the cattle pool! Damn the dirty, cowardly hold-outs! We'll kill their lousy women and kids! We'll shoot 'em where we find 'em walking or riding a trail! Come out, damn you, and fight like men! We know you're hiding over there!"

"Ike! Ike!" Old Luke had come popping back outside, the red swinging doors flapping behind him. "Shut yore damn' mouth 'fore I knock yuh down an' stomp yore brains out. Wait for the Highlander boys! They'll be here just any time!"

"To hell with waitin' for anybody!" Cockeyed Ike gave his father a one-sided push, so hard that it sent the old man stumbling and wheeling to fall to his hands and knees in the deep dust around the hitchrack. "I'm a fighting man! I cover all the ground I stand on, and I can whip any two men who ever stood on feet!"

"But—but, Ike, Ike!" The old man came up, still trying to stop him, hat gone, face like chalk, knowing that he was dealing with a crazy man. "I told yuh to wait! Wait, yuh damn' fool, an' give them Highlander boys a chance to get here!"

"Come out and fight, I'm telling you!" Nothing was going to stop Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater. Still howling like a maniac, he knocked the old man down, this time with a wild blow to the jaw that sent Luke pitching face-first into the dust. Ike was just drunk enough now not to be afraid of the devil, drunk enough to dare the very heavens down to fight him. "Come on out, you dirty Rafter Arrows! Take the call of a fighting man!"

* * *

"Wait, Buck, wait!" Over in the Queen of Hearts they were having a time holding Hell-fire Buck Allan. Wayne Rider, a short, thick-set bronc buster, had had sense enough to jump ahead of the old man and close the heavy oak front doors. "Give them what they want! Let the Highlanders come! Let the street fill up with 'em, an' then we'll open up!"

"But he thinks," yelled the old man, "that we're scared of 'im!"

"Let 'im think it, Buck!" Little, squint-eyed Charley Drew, as deadly as a rattlesnake when once started, was siding with Rider now. "Maybe it will be the best play we can make!"

"Heap of sense to that, Hellfire."

The voice behind them was so calm it was like a sudden shot itself. They turned, eyes popping as they stared at the tall, loose-jointed figure of the sheriff of Buckskin River standing there, the muzzle of a pumpgun covering them all, even to fat and bald-headed old Moss Hatcher who had come out from behind the bar in all the excitement.

"I wouldn't move, ary one of yuh," the sheriff was going on, before they could recover from their surprise. "Just reach for the ceilin' an' keep yore paws there. This thing's got a trigger slicker'n a greased hog on it, an' buck-shot's kinda bad for the belly."

"Me, now," he told them, "I know all yuh jokers, wives an' daughters, sons an' sweet-hearts, an' I know most ever-body else in these parts. I think I'm kinda outmartin' Cockeyed Ike. Moss," he cut a quick glance at the bartender, "yuh open that hole in the floor there at the head of the bar. Yore cellar's gonna have company. Easy!" He wriggled the shotgun as a cowboy's hand started to drop. "Once I let go with this thing the whole push of yuh are apt to start fallin' dead in yore tracks. Move, Moss!"

They cursed him with every profanity they could bring to tongue, and it looked as if they would go for their guns a dozen times, but once old man Hatcher had opened the trapdoor at the head of the bar he was driving them down the narrow stairs. When the last man was down, still cursing him, still threatening, Sam Easy gave another order.

"Roll up a couple of them barrels of whiskey an' set 'em on that door. I'm kinda takin' over the Queen of Hearts for a spell, Moss."

"They—they'll kill me if I help yuh, Sam!" Moss whined.

"Yo've done been helpin' me!" snapped the sheriff. "Do I have to wrop about half this scatter-gun 'round yore shinin' moon head to let yuh know yo're goin' to go right on helpin' me?"

The barrels of whiskey were rolled forward then and placed on the door, Moss Hatcher cursing and whimpering all through it, saying over and over that he was signing his own death warrant.

"Which is a lie, Moss." Sam Easy was finally grinning at him. "I'm the same fella what told them to get into that hole, an' they got. Yuh ask 'em why they got if they say anything to yuh. Now hit 'er for the back door. I said I was takin' over the Queen of Hearts for a spell, an' I ain't never been a man to fool yuh."

A minute later, the bartender gone and the heavy rear doors barred, he turned, walking toward the front of the room, the raging of Cockeyed Ike still filling the town from the east side of the street.

"KEEP back inside, boys, keep back!" Old Luke Drinkwater was managing the men behind him, but Ike was still too much for him. "He won't cross the street unless he knows yo're right at his heels! Ike's a plain damn coward when yuh come right down to—Uh!"

"Shut that talk!" Cockeyed Ike had struck out again, a blow this time that caught the old man on the point of the chin and sent him flopping back into the dust. "I'm a fighter! I'm blue hell! Come out damn you!" He was shaking his fists and dancing crazily now. "Don't hide behind your closed doors! Come out and answer the call of a fighting man!"

"I reckon I'm callin', Ike."

The voice was again so calm it was startling. The front doors of the Queen of Hearts had opened. A swing of the bat-wings had let Sam Easy step forward, shotgun in the crook of his arm, old hat slanted low on his forehead to shield those pale eyes, and unlit cigarette drooping from the right side of his mouth.

"If yuh wanta die fast an' hard, then yuh can start sawin' for yore shootin' tools, Ike."

"You?" Old Luke was up on his hands and knees.

"Yup, it's me, Luke." The sheriff was coming on steadily. "This old thing's kinda tricky." He covered them with the shotgun now without increasing his pace. "Goes off sometimes when I just look at it."

"Steady, Ike, steady." A strange, whisper-like whimper had come into Old Luke Drinkwater's tone. "This damn' fool will kill yuh."

"Ike knows it, Luke." The sheriff had reached the middle of the street. "Start reachin' for the place where the angels fly, bad fella. I'm sorter mad this mornin', an' when I get mad I'm meaner'n hell an' don't care who I kill. Yore daddy's said a thousan' times yo're a plain coward. Yo're that an' a heap more, yuh long, hungry-lookin' snake! Why'n hell don't yuh go for yore guns? Show a man how bad yuh really are!"

"Don't goad 'im, Sam!" half-wept old Luke, on his feet again, his hands lifting. "Yuh shorely ain't just lookin' for an excuse to kill my son, yuh damned fool!"

"I aim to take yuh both to jail, that's all." Sam Easy had stopped ten feet away. "Either to jail or send yuh six feet under in the cold clay. If Ike makes one funny move I'll blow that fancy shirt bosom right on back through his belly just to hear 'im clatter an' fall apart. It goes for yuh both, just like sayin' 'Howdy, Mister Smith,' if any of yore bunch in the saloon behind yuh decide to take a shot at us while we're goin' up the street."

"Now," he waved the shotgun, "get the hell agoin'!"

"But—but," Old Luke was finding his voice

again, "yuh can't do this to us, Sam! Why—why, Sam, I voted for yuh! Last fall was for the third term, an'—an' I helped the first one when yuh wasn't much more'n a slick-faced yearlin'!"

"The jailhouse," said the sheriff, "is up the street, right yonder on the rise. Grab that jackass yuh call Ike by the arm, the pants, or where it's best to take holt of a skunk like 'im, an' start. Once more I warn yuh: If any of yore monkeys in that joint behind yuh take a shot at us, then I'll kill yuh both. Now get goin'!"

"Better do what he tells us, Ike." The old cowman gave his son a pull. "This crazy fool has horns when—when he starts to fight."

Chapter II

GUNTRAP

PEOPLE who dared to peep from windows and cracked doors had never seen anything like it. Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater and his father were actually going to jail. In the ugly hush that had gripped the town the sheriff was right behind them, the muzzle of his shotgun covering them, the dust of the street muffling the fall of their footsteps for a long time before the old man and his son started cursing. Oddly enough it was the pale Cockeyed Ike, stumbling and kicking at the dust as if lifting a cloud to hide them, who made the fewest threats.

"An' now," ordered the sheriff when they were inside the office of the jail, "I sorter think it time to unbuckle yore hardware an' let it drop. Watch yore hands!" He gave the door a kick behind him that sent it slamming closed. "I may not stop this thing; I may not do but a mite of good, even none at all, but I'm still the sheriff of Buckskin River an' gonna be that as long as I wear yore badge."

"We'll make bond, Sam." Old Luke was trying to be calm now. "Yuh just name the figger an' I'll sign 'er."

"What in hell have we done," snarled the big Ike, "to make a bond for! He hasn't got anything on us!"

"Only the muzzle of a slide-trombone shotgun, Ike." Sam Easy answered him, watching the older man even more closely than his son. "Just do as you're told. I ain't takin' no bond today."

"But we'll get out!" Old Luke started to snarl. "Seth Scully will see to that!"

"If," nodded the sheriff, "he ain't soon locked up back there with yuh, Luke. Better let them belts drop. All yuh can ever get outa yore thoughts of makin' a fast play on me is a gut-full of buckshot."

"Yuh dirty dog!" Old Luke let his belts

drop. "But we're gonna get outa here soon, Sam. We'll get out, an' then, Sam Easy, we'll lay yuh so low in the ground the worms won't find yuh! You're takin' sides with the Allan gang. Knowed all along yuh would do it. Yo'd double-cross yore own mother!"

"All right, Ike!" Easy prodded the younger Drinkwater with the muzzle of the shotgun. "Let 'em drop—an' get on inside. I ain't got all day to stand an' fool with a couple of monkeys like yuh, not when there's so many more to be fetched in. Besides," he half grinned, "I've got a little date with the Highlander fellas. As we stepped on the jailhouse porch I saw dust risin' in the southwest."

"There! There!" yelled Old Luke, wheeling on his son in a fury and shoving a knotty fist under his nose. "I told yuh, yuh long-legged damn fool! Told yuh to wait!"

"Get on inside if you're going to let Sam Easy do this to us!" Cockeyed Ike gave him a push. "I thought you had pull and standing in this town. It looks like you're just another come-along to this big hick behind me with that shotgun in my back. Move!"

Then Cockeyed Ike shoved his father on inside, saving the sheriff the trouble. Sam Easy herded them on to the last cell on his left. Leaving them there, locked inside, Old Luke cursing, and swearing that he had mashed his best trigger finger when he closed the door on them, he was back in the office, the front corridor door also closed and locked, when another wild hammering of hoofs hit the lower end of the street.

Not wanting to carry the heavy jail keys around in his pocket, he stood for a moment glancing to the right and left, first at the big old iron safe in one corner of the room, then at his spur-tracked desk in another corner. He was lifting the leg of his trousers, hanging the keys half in and half out of his boot when all hell suddenly broke out down the street.

Guns were barking and crashing now, startling him for a moment when he looked through a window and saw one blaze of fire after another coming from the front of the Queen of Hearts and answering volleys beginning to pour from the Saddle Rope & Spur. Horsemen in the lower end of the street were fanning out.

"It means," he told himself with a growl, "that the Allan gang's busted outa the cellar or old Moss sneaked back somehow an' let 'em out. An' now," his eyes were on those scattering horsemen, "I've got the Highlanders on me to boot!"

He turned then to the tall gun-locker on the wall. Opening it he started taking down old-fashioned muzzle-loaders. As he stood the first two weapons on the floor, the wall appeared suddenly to spring into an ugly black cloud in front of him, and he went down,

loosely, the blood flying, the noise of a shot from the east window of the office only a faint, thundering sound in his ears.

A moment later, a short, bulky man in boots and chaps heaved himself through the window. Six-shooter in hand, cocked and ready for another shot, he moved swiftly to the sheriff's side. In a matter of seconds he had pulled up the sheriff's trouser leg and had the keys. Backing now to the corridor door, he unlocked it, watching everything, waiting as if listening for something. Then he swung the door open and cautiously peered inside, dark eyes so beady and bright they might have been rare jewels set in the low-browed skull.

"Luke?" He called whisperingly. "Ike?"

"Huh?" Old Luke answered. "Who'n hell is it?"

And what the dickens," snarled the nasty-tempered Ike, "do you want, calling us?"

"Alone back there?"

"That's right!" snapped back Cockeyed Ike. "Again I'm asking what you want!—I—I Well, by golly, Pa, it's Sneaky Pete Pardeau!"

"Damned if it ain't!" said the older man. "Sneaky Pete!"

LOCKED down in an evil-smelling cellar where rats as large as tomcats played tag with each other, was no place for Hellfire Buck Allan. The place was stone-walled and windowless, rarely used since a store room in the rear had been set up against the wall as a lean-to. In the damp darkness they had to curse out heaven and earth before a cowboy with a match found an old lantern. By the light of that they had found a rusty axe, and had started to work.

Sam Easy had not bothered to take their weapons, and when prying with the axe failed to part the hinges of the trapdoor. Hellfire Buck tried to shoot them off. Failing in that, he had snatched the axe, and with a cowboy holding the lantern, had started chopping away at the timber holding the door. Finally the timber had parted, letting the door and the barrels of whiskey come tumbling down, almost on top of them.

"An' now," the old man had grinned, hooking the balls of perspiration from his forehead with a crooked forefinger, "up an' to hell outa here we go. Stand back, Shorty! It's me what takes the lead. Sam Easy might still be up there waitin' on us, though I think I heard 'im go on out the front door. If he's still up there, I'm good as dead, or he's good as dead when I hit top-air."

And up they had come, one after another into the shadowy room. Not yet had they had time to know exactly what had happened, but they saw no sign of Easy, no sign of the crowing Cockeyed Ike or his daddy. But they had seen Drinkwater men, and it had been

Hellfire Buck who had stuck his head out over the winged doors to yell.

"All right, damn yuh, let's go to town!"

And then the war had started, guns flashing, men inside the Queen of Hearts hugging the sides of the doorway and the windows at either side of it, the answering shots tearing at them from across the street.

Horses at the hitchracks at either side of the street had lunged backward. A few of them had been tied by their halter shanks. The rest had only their reins pitched across them, cowboy fashion. The street was soon filled with them, those tied to the racks tearing them down, the others simply wheeling. As they started down the street those with the halter shanks still fastened followed them, dragging the racks along with them and making the dust boil in mountainous clouds.

Now, dodging the stampeding horses, the Highlanders were coming into the fight, led by Fuzzy Frank Swindell, as big as a house, his hair and great mattress of a beard flying. He swung his tall bay to the right when he saw the running horses, sending streaks of fire and gunsmoke ahead of him as he realized they were about to plunge straight into the middle of raging hell itself.

With Fuzzy Frank—a one-time Southwest outlaw if all reports were true—to lead them, the Highlanders were tougher, quicker to kill than the Drinkwaters. They were all hard drinkers, hard riders, devil-may-care hellions. Each time they came to town on a spree, two or three of them had to be thrown in jail. Seeing them coming, Hellfire Buck ripped out an order.

"Four of yuh fellas, Dink, Bud, Crow an' Pat, hit that ladder agin the wall at the other end of the bar an' up through that lid to the roof. Chaney an' Tubby will watch the back way. We ain't gettin' caught in no fool mess agin like Sam Easy caught us. No, by Gawd! An'," he added hastily, "we ain't fallin' in no trap if we can help it."

"Wonder where them Crazy Bones fellas are?" a little, cross-eyed, red-headed and buck-toothed cowboy by the name of Jimmy Rivers was asking when a bullet from across the street sent him away from the doorway to start wrapping a soiled handkerchief around a wound on his right wrist. "They oughta be here!"

"They'll come, give 'em time." There was a hint of doubt in Hellfire Buck Allan's tone at that moment, for he had just seen squint-eyed little Charley Drew stagger back from the window at the head of the bar with a foolish smile, a streak of blood appearing at each side of his mouth. "Judd Clark's wife was late with breakfast agin, I guess. I'd take a latigo to her, I swear. What's the matter, Charley?"

But Charley Drew had no answer for him. He was going down, and he had staggered into a direct line with the doorway. Before old Hellfire Buck could reach him and drag him out of the way, a hail of bullets poured through the opening, a dozen of them catching the little man in the back, pitching him forward on his face.

It seemed less than a second later before another man was down at the opposite window, a young fellow named Dawson who had been with the Rafter Arrow less than six months. As Dawson lurched back, one hand still clawed to the casing of the window, shots started drumming from the roof as the four men up there opened fire on others on roofs across the street, in a deadly fury.

"Looks kinda bad," Allan sent a burst of shots across the street, shooting at a window in the Saddle Rope & Spur. "Sorta wonderin' why them Crazy Boners ain't here, myself."

"Listen!" Wayne Rider's ears seemed a trifle sharper than any of the others. "I hear somebody comin'—from the north!"

"Could be the Hatfield boys," grunted Allan, reloading a long, black Colt, "though they didn't expect to make it till somewhere right 'round noon. Might be the Crazy Boners—Nope, I know that damned rebel yell!" His old eyes suddenly brightened. "That's the Hatfields—Green, Wince an' Spark!"

It was clear then that somebody had come. From up the street, sounding as if it were from the jailhouse itself, came the sounds of men yelling and squawling as though going through some drunken Indian dance.

Buckskin River was like a ship tossing in a storm, sadly heeled over, and then, suddenly, beginning to right itself. Hellfire Buck Allan would never have admitted it at the time, but the Rafter Arrows were on the losing side of the game, outnumbered at the start. But the coming of the Highlanders made it far more than a two-to-one proposition.

Those Highlanders knew how to fight. Their splitting in the middle of the street was no accident. Half had gone to the east side, half to the west. Some of those on the west side had immediately moved into position where they could cover the rear door and windows of the Queen of Hearts, after taking up positions behind trees and rocks, and the rest had headed for the roofs.

Across the street, once Fuzzy Frank Swindell was in the war, the north end of the street and the west side had been cut off. Swindell had sent men almost as far as the jail, having them keep behind houses and stores, and then had them rush across, passing right in front of the silent jail. Thus the trap had been formed, the jaws of it slowly closing in. Now all that was being changed. Highlanders and Drinkwaters were being caught in

the same kind of a trap that they had laid.

"The Crazy Boners are in 'er now!" yelled Allan as the firing grew louder and louder, yells, curses and excited poundings coming with it. "Hear the music of them guns! Come on, boys!" He started for the front door in a wild jump. "Let's go out an' finish bustin' 'em down! We've won 'er!"

"Hold it!" Wayne Rider had sense enough to grab him by the arm and yank him back as another rain of bullets poured through the doorway. "We ain't that foolish! Don't get killed just because the fight's only about over!"

"But it is over!" roared the cowman. "They're licked! Listen to 'em howlin' for horses! Listen to 'em runnin' an' scramblin', ever'body tryin' his damndest to get away!"

"They're licked for now, not forever." Wayne Rider was not one to lose his head over anything; he was certainly not going to dash outside just to get killed. "They're fightin' men, an' a fightin' man always has one more kick left. Keep back from that door!"

Chapter III

LAST LAUGH FOR A DEAD MAN

DRUNK on the complete victory—at least for the day—that had come to them, it was the wildest mob Buckskin River had ever seen. Six-shooters still roared, but most of them were fired in the air. Allan riders, Crazy Boners and Hatfielders grabbed each other and danced in the street. It seemed that not a Drinkwater man or a Highlander who could ride, walk or crawl had been left in town. Most of them had made their get-away riding double on half-flying horses heading back down the valley.

Left to its fate, the Saddle Rope & Spur suffered. Bottles and glasses were shot off the back bar; the stove was overturned in the center of the floor; the front bar was hauled over with a crash. Had Roosh Hendry been on hand he might have suffered, but he had deserted everything, even the money-drawer, and had gone galloping home to take shelter behind the skirts of his wife and children.

"An' now I wanta see Sam Easy!" howled Hellfire Buck Allan. "The ornery son mighta thought that he was doin' the right thing, but he was supposed to be my friend."

"Eats Sunday dinner at my house ever' chance he gets," growled the tall, slow-spoken Green Hatfield. "Folks know, o' course, that he's been sparkin' my Mattie Martha, only that ain't gonna make no difference now. Back where I come from a man who once turns agin yuh is allus agin yuh. Let's go see Sam Easy."

"The jailhouse," put in the equally tall and slow-spoken Wince Hatfield, "looked as quiet

when we passed as a good McCoy back home—an' there ain't no good McCoy onless he's a dead McCoy."

"True as the Lord's prayer!" nodded Spark, the undersized one of the Hatfield lot. "We'll go see Sam."

But somebody had another notion on the spur of the moment. They headed for the bank. After Hellfire Buck had kicked on the front doors and threatened to tear them down, they were opened by tall, timid old Marsh Nicholson, the cashier. Marsh was slammed back behind one door, and the gang barged in, turning to their left and were soon in the rear office where long, pale-faced and gray-bearded Rice Grant was sitting. Beside him, to his left, sat Judge Seth Scully, red of face, his tobacco-stained goatee and drooping mustaches quivering.

The third man sat in a corner beyond the desk, and everybody recognized him at once as Mr. Pete Pardeau, a stranger who had come to Bucks River a week or two after Julian Brady and Horth Shell. About all anybody knew about him was that he had taken a room down at the Owl Head Hotel and had developed a sudden taking to boots and chaps, big hats and long-shanked spurs, the latter tripping him several times when he first tried to strut the street in them. What connection—if any—he had in the forming of the cattle pool was unknown.

"Where're those fellas Brady an' Shell?" Hellfire Buck asked. "Yuh got 'em locked up in the bank, Rice?"

"Why—why, no, Buck. No!" Grant started to rise, changed his mind after a glance at Judge Scully, and slumped back. "You—you fellows must have scared them out of town." He tried to laugh, making a sound like the croaking of a small frog. "I might have gone myself, had I known a fine hole to run for!"

"The same here!" Scully's laugh was better, he being more of the politician. "Haven't seen anything like it, Buck, since you and your boys whipped the outlaw gang at the head of Snake Creek. By George—"

"Yuh wasn't there to see nothin', Seth!" Allan glowered. "What's that punk," he jabbed a thumb backward at Pardeau, "doin' here? Don't tell me he's gonna furnish the water for yore cow pool!"

"Mr. Pardeau," Rice Grant rose slowly, cautiously, "isn't interested in cattle pools, Buck. He's interested in—er—minerals. Gold deposits, silver and such."

"Oh, he is!" Allan shoved back his old hat and vigorously scratched his head. "Well, I'll tell yuh now," he turned and glowered at Pardeau, "don't let me catch yuh diggin' holes on Rafter Arrow range, Mr. Pilledew. I don't like holes. Rice," he swung back to the bank-

er, "yuh still interested in the cow pool?"

"Only—only," the banker's long buzzard face paled, "in an' so far as it will be good for the country. I investigated Mr. Brady and Mr. Shell, and I found them—"

"With a most excellent background, Buck!" hastily put in the judge. "I, too, am only interested in the welfare of my people, these good souls who have honored me—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped the old cowman. "Dammit, Seth, yuh even get up to spout for votes at a funeral. Ain't no place yuh squirts will stop, no boot yuh won't lick."

He cursed them out after that, threatening to take them outside and have them hauled across a hitchrack to be horse-whipped. Green Hatfield finally talked him out of it.

"A man," growled Hatfield, "is supposed to be able to think what he wants to think in this country. Maybe these two damn fools have just been taken in, line an' sinker. I didn't see no gunfire comin' from the bank, otherwise I'd say hang hell outa both of 'em."

"But I'm warning yuh, Rice. Watch yoreself!" He leaned over the desk, pointing a finger under the banker's nose. "It's war now. Most of us keep our money in other banks so yuh can't handle it. But yuh be careful. Damn careful!"

"An' that goes for yuh, hawg-fat!" His hand moved quickly to the judge's red face, giving the man's nose a little twist. "Yuh fined me once for callin' yuh a plain whiskey-gut in yore court—an' I've still got that in my craw. Let's go see Sam, boys."

Then, apparently accomplishing nothing at all, Green Hatfield led the way out and over to the jail, a great swarm following him. When he kicked open the door to the office he stood back, mouth sagging open, a chew of tobacco falling from his jaw.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he grunted. "Whut—whut'n hell yuh doin' in the jailhouse with that polecat, Mattie Martha!"

"Sam Easy has been shot," a tall, dark-haired girl with wide, frank gray eyes answered him. "Ike Drinkwater's back there in a cell, shot through the eyes. I followed you in, Daddy, knowing what you were up to, but it was over before I could get here, so I stopped at the jail—"

"Hold, now!" Green Hatfield threw up a long, lean hand. "What'n hell was yuh sayin' 'bout Cockeyed Ike Drinkwater? Did it hurt im?"

"It ruined him," answered the girl, calmly going back to work over the sheriff sprawled in a chair. "Sam has a bad scalp wound."

"Ruined 'im?" Hatfield and all who could follow had poured back into the corridor of the jail a couple of seconds later. No, it wrecked 'im! Ain't he a purty sight lyin' there with his arm flung around that chair in the corner,

buckteeth a-shinin' through the blood!" He laughed shortly. "By golly, looks just like he was a-grinnin' at us!"

"His daddy oughta be with 'im." A man who had taken no part in the fight had shoved open the rear door where the keys still hung in the lock, and had stepped inside. "Sam Easy had both of 'em on the end of a shotgun when I saw 'im marchin' 'em up the street."

"Then where's Old Luke now?" Allan wanted to know. "Look in all them cells, fellas, under the bunks an' ever'-where! He might even be clingin' to a ceilin' like a fly!"

"I looked in all them cells." Hatfield was still staring at the dead man on the floor, sprawled down between the lower iron bunk and the corner, the face a mass of blood, only his huge teeth showing through. "Ain't no-body else here."

"But look at this thing!" Green Hatfield laughed, a wicked, all-jarring splatter of contempt. Some of the men in the corridor had dragged off their hats. Now they put them back on, grinning mirthlessly. "I ain't never seen nothin' so much like a grinnin' possum in my life—unless it was a possum. Let's go back to Sam Easy."

WITH CONSCIOUSNESS so completely blotted out of him that he was yet unable to define his right hand from his left, Sam Easy could not tell them anything. Mattie Martha had managed to get him off the floor and backed into a big chair. But the icy-cold water from the tap in the corner seemed to have no effect on him despite Mattie Martha Hatfield's constant dabbings.

"But he brought both Ol' Luke an' Cockeyed Ike to jail," insisted a townsman who had taken no part in the fight. "Ol' Luke wouldn't o' shot Ike. Hell, Ike's allus led 'im 'round by the nose, makin' him foot the bill for his fightin' scrapes."

Old Doc Chum was there with his little black bag before Easy really started taking stock of his surroundings. The lean old doctor placed his bag on the desk and sewed up the ugly tear in his scalp, then held a bottle of smelling salts under his nose for a full minute.

Then Sam Easy told them, scowling at himself, sparing himself not a thing, what had happened. He had started in like a house afire, he reckoned, and had come down like the rafters, accomplishing nothing. Sam Easy always told a straight tale, and there were few in the crowd to doubt him. Certainly there was no one brazen enough to say it.

"I had high aims," he wound up, "of jailin' Hellfire Buck an' Wayne Rider 'fore I was done, then tryin' to get my hands on Fuzzy Frank Swindell, an' that mighta held it down."

"But where was ol' Luke?"

"Right in the cell with Ike." He gazed

absent-mindedly at a window to his left. "Seems like I heard a shot or somethin' from there. Ain't even shore about that. Danged little certain of anything right now. I guess I was kinda foolish, though I didn't have time for much."

"Luke Drinkwater's still in town." One of the Crazy Boners had come pushing forward. He didn't leave with none of the others. He was up on a knoll southeast of the Saddle Rope, high enough to start pourin' lead on the roofs. I saw ever'body that left town, an' Luke Drinkwater, I tell yuh, wasn't nary one of 'em."

"An' he ain't among the kilt!" popped in another cowboy, this time one of the Hatfield riders. "Not unless it's a body what ain't yet been found, an' we've picked up four, plus three fellas what got shot an' have a fair chance of makin' more trouble."

"Onless," nodded Green Hatfield, "we hang 'em an' get it done. I had two haystacks set on fire, an' my new shed's burned to the ground right after midnight."

"But yuh ain't startin' no lynch law in my town, Green." Some of the cold glitter had come back into Sam Easy's eyes. "Not if I'm able to crawl to the gun-locker an' get me down my guns."

"And if Sam can't crawl," put in the girl, hotly, "I'll crawl for him! If you have to hang a man, hang a well one, not some crippled-up fool who let himself be talked into this thing!"

"Wimmin, as of yit," Buck Allan glared at her, "ain't been axed to set in judgment on this thing, young un. Me, now, I'd take me a good, stout latigo with a buckle on the end of it an' put yuh in yore place. I rule the roost at my house."

"Damned 'f yuh don't, Buck!" Green Hatfield was suddenly turning on him with a roar of laughter. "I passed the Rafter Arrow only last Fall, an' yore wife had yuh treed atop of the beam over the corral gate, an' all she had to tree yuh with was a buggy whip. That was right after that trip yuh had taken back to Kansas City or Saint Louis with a trainload of cows. Seems as how she'd found paid bills for 'round six hundred dollars in yore pockets for clothes yuh bought—"

"Shut up!" cut in Allan with a roar, his face suddenly white. "Yuh don't need to read a whole book about me."

"Don't aim to!" Hatfield was still laughing. "Wasn't that gal's name Daisy Mae or somethin' like that, Buck?"

"Thunderation, gimme room!" Allan had wheeled and was already pawing his way through the crowd and trying to get to the front door. "That fool ain't got a lick of sense!"

It was the jolt they needed—laughter. When men started laughing they could not think of

fighting. Yet they were soon currying the town again for old Luke Drinkwater, dead certain that he just had to be found somewhere, but there was no sign of him.

"An' all yore horses are in the stables out back, Sam," frowned Green Hatfield. "I looked myself. Whoever shot yuh—well, he went right on back an' killed Cockeyed Ike, then he musta taken Luke out the back way. Keys was there, in the door. Saw 'em myself."

"But why," Sam Easy was wanting to know, the pretty girl in a chair now beside him, "would they just want to kill Ike and take Luke away? Why didn't they kill them both and have it done?"

"Don't ax me, Sam." Hatfield took off his dusty hat and scratched his shaggy head. "I ain't supposed to be too smart in the first place, an' knowin' it I was never fool enough to let 'em run me for sheriff. Figgerin' this thing out is yore job. That's what they're payin' yuh for. I feel like takin' my bunch an' goin' home."

"You should have stayed there in the first place!" The girl was after him again. "You knew that coming to Hell River today could mean only one thing, and that one thing was blood!"

"Blood, yeah." Hatfield replaced his hat, carefully squaring it on his head. "They tell me a man's veins is filled with it—a real man's, that is, an' I had to come. My friends was a-comin'—"

"One banking on the other!"

"Yep, one bankin' on the other," nodded Hatfield, grimly. "That's the only way we could lick this country in the old days. We was all right as long as we stayed like that. It's these jokers comin' here to set up a cow pool what's got us so far apart of late nobody can get us back together. Sam," his voice rose, "ain't yuh got a bit of drinkin' whiskey 'round the jail?"

CREEPING footsteps on a rocky floor aroused old Luke Drinkwater shortly before midnight. Not that he knew the time. Time was of no importance any more. It seemed that he had been through hell over and over, and he knew that more hell was to come to him. He had seen his son murdered in jail, shot through the latticed steel door of the cell while down on his knees praying and begging, with the noise of the battle going on in Buckskin River loud enough to drown almost anything. Old Luke, himself, had been marched out right after that, a six-shooter covering him until his hands had been whipped behind him. A rusty pair of handcuffs from the wall of the jail office had locked his wrists behind him, then a gag had been placed in his mouth.

Sneaky Pete Pardeau had been as cold-blooded as hell about it, even chewing a little wad of gum all the time. Not until the gag and the handcuffs were in place had he given the old man any inkling of what was wanted of him, and yet old Luke Drinkwater and his headstrong son had been told what to expect if Ike kept running off at the mouth.

"We're taking a little walk, Drinkwater." Sneaky Pete had given the handcuffs a tug just to make sure they were tight. "Not far. Out the back door, then down that deep ditch you call a wash in this crazy country. It'll keep us hidden well enough until we get to the big bluffs above the river. There's a trail there. You may know about it. We're making a little detour that will take us right below the bank. A lot of fools in this town, I'm told, have forgotten that the bank was built over a big crack in the rocks that turns out to be a cave below the vault. In that spot we'll make further talk."

"And try anything tricky," Sneaky Pete had leered his little leer with that, "and I'll show you how quick you can die. You saw Big Mouth get it." Sneaky Pete had never called Ike anything else. "Big Mouth's had it coming for a long time. If the boss had listened to me in K. C. he would have got it back there when he couldn't pay up his gambling bills. Get along now and be quiet. Any noise means you'll be 'It' as we used to say when we were kids."

It was cold here on the floor now, cold and dark and damp where a four-inch pipe from the bank came down, to which the old man's feet had been fastened with a lock and chain. They were taking no chances on his getting away. Sneaky Pete Pardeau probably did not like the thought of a strong saddle rope around his neck, with one end made fast to some limb high over him.

Now Sneaky Pete was coming back to see him. Sneaky Pete always walked like somebody creeping, even when shuffling along at a fast pace. Old Luke could only wonder what he would want this time. Surely it was not just to stand and gloat. He had come for that three times, already, a shadow standing there with a lantern, the old man unable to say a word, even to cuss the livin' hell right out of 'im!

But this time, as the old man studied them, the footsteps did not belong to Sneaky Pete Pardeau. They came on, halting here and there as if their owner was not entirely certain of himself, and then they stumbled, a whispered oath close at hand now in the darkness.

Now as if caution was something that no longer mattered, a match was struck. In the flare of light, Luke Drinkwater blinked, lying there looking up at the figure of Sam Easy,

his head in a bandage, old hat sawed on to one side in an attempt to hide it.

"Luke!"

"Uh-uh," The grunt behind the gag was all that Luke Drinkwater could muster, but it was enough. Match quickly whipped out, Sam Easy dropped to a squat beside him, hands working swiftly in the darkness until he had removed the gag.

"An' now," the sheriff's voice was like a series of whispers, "maybe yuh can tell a fella what'n hell you're doin' here? Looks like you're goin' back to yore native state of polecat-in-a-hole."

"He'll—kill—yuh, too, Sam." It took a long time for the old man to use his voice, and then it came in jerks and sudden stops of harsh whispers. "Sneaky Pete's—bad—medicine. He killed Ike. Said—at first—he'd killed yuh."

"Almost did it, too." The sheriff's voice came with the hint of a chuckle. "Head was just too thick, I reckon, Luke. What'n hell did he kill Ike for? Ike was shorely workin' for the cattle pool. An'," he added hastily, "why didn't he kill yuh in jail, too?"

"They want the Drinkwater outfit before they stop my clock, Sam." It took the old man another period of time before he could come out with that, all in a rush. "Me shot dead without signin' all the papers wouldn't do. An' they'd sound legal an' all that, payin' up for money Ike borrowed an' lost in Kansas City, an' the other debts he was supposed to have run up, too.

"Ike killed a man an' a woman in Kansas City, Sam. That is, he was supposed to. Ike died without knowin' the truth, I guess. Sneaky Pete told me about it not more'n—well, hell, the last time he was here to stand an' poke fun at me.

"Yuh see, it was a fake fight in some fool gamblin' cellar back there in the big town. Ike was drunk, as usual when his pockets was full of money. A gal had been playin' him. He got slapped by a fella an' come up from the table shootin'. The gal an' the other fella fell. There was some blood from somewhere, an' Ike was told they were both dead. It scared the livin' hell outa him, an' the gang back there roped him in to do just what he was told to do. This cow pool's all a big fake, Sam. Nobody'll get a dime from the cows they pour into it."

"An' yuh would go in on a deal like that, Luke?"

"Had to, Sam," winced the old man. "Either that or see—I thought—Ike taken back to Kansas City an' hung. Now they'll get the Drinkwater, then the Highlander—all of it 'fore they're done."

"You're a bigger damn fool than I thought." Sam Easy's voice was hard in the darkness. "No matter. We'll play 'er out. I just hap-

pened to think of this hole, an' I saddled up an' pretended to ride outa town at sundown, sayin' I was goin' out to bring in Fuzzy Frank. Atter dark I switched back. Where'll they take yuh from here—if anywhere?"

"Don't know." The answer came with something like a shudder in the old man's voice. "Sneaky Pete ain't said. Maybe doesn't know. He's just the prize-hawg killer for Brady an' Shell, Trigger doctor, they call 'em, Ike said once. But don't just set there. Git me outa here."

"Nope, yuh ain't goin' nowhere yet." Sam Easy was feeling for his face, about to return the gag. "Yuh set in with 'em to ruin this country. Now yuh set out the game, keepin' yore mouth shut. I ain't goin' to be too far away from yuh from now on. I've got to see this thing through."

"Don't, don't." Old Luke was rolling his head from side to side, but the gag was going back in place in spite of him. In a minute the job was done, with grunts that were probably intended for curses coming from behind the gag.

"Now yuh lay like yuh was," growled the sheriff. "I oughta maybe let yuh lie there forever, yuh old cuss, or just kick yuh in the guts an' throw yuh in the river. But I can't throw yuh nowhere until I get that chain off yore feet. I'll have to get a bolt-cutter from the blacksmith shop for that job. But I'll be back. If Sneaky comes while I'm gone he'll find yuh just like he left yuh. That means he won't know that I come down here an' found yuh."

Then he turned and moved quietly away, heading for new troubles.

Chapter IV

SAM EASY DOES IT EASY

THE WHISPERING night wind was cool on his cheeks when Sam Easy eased himself out of the mouth of the hole and turned to start working his way upward in the shelves of rock above the river. As yet there was no light in the bank, and wouldn't be. Nobody would be fool enough for that. There was no moon, either, making the ascent dark and dangerous. For the last few yards he was on his hands and knees, careful to keep away from the wider ledges where he might meet somebody sneaking along to that dark-mouthed hole below the bank.

He was in an ideal position for the worst to happen to him when he slid over the last shelf behind old Boot Bender's saddle shop with its rear wall extended to within a yard of the rim. Here it was slightly lighter, and it was here that the blow fell, the muzzle of a six-shooter stabbing forward, just as he was getting to his

feet, and pressing hard against his back.

"Sam Easy does it *easy*, doesn't he, chum?" hissed a voice behind him. "One move and I blow you. One shot and you hit that river below. Lift your hands, you small-town clown."

It was Sneaky Pete Pardeau. Sam Easy had known it by the time Pete had spoken his first five words. With the gunman's left hand reaching forward and catching Easy's heavy belts from behind, he was pulled backward now for a pace, the pressure of the six-shooter muzzle in his back telling him when to stop. In a matter of seconds after that Sneaky Pete was slipping his long .45's from their holsters and tossing them over the rim.

"Little bad-town sheriffs," Pardeau chuckled almost softly, "oughtn't to play with firearms, Easy. Guess I'll take the handcuffs out of the armhole of your vest now. *Easy, Easy!*" He gave the muzzle of the six-shooter a boring twist in the sheriff's back. "One shot, one kick as you're falling, and over the rim to the river you go."

"Yuh seem to be the doctor right now, Sneaky." The sheriff's voice was calm. "I'm the patient takin' yore pills."

"Have a nice talk with old man Luke?" Pardeau had the handcuffs and was carefully pulling down Easy's left arm to bring it up behind his back. "Told you a lot of sweet things, I guess?"

"Some, maybe." Knowing there was no use trying to lie about it, Sam Easy was still as calm as an old boot. "Said yuh was a slick article, an' I reckon he didn't lie about it, Sneaky."

"I don't like that name any too well, Easy!" The muzzle of the six-shooter bored again, the weapon higher in the sheriff's back now to make certain that the hand behind him would not grab for it. "A lot do call me that, but they're mostly my friends. Slip down that right hand and be careful with it. Remember, one shot, one kick—"

"Yuh needn't remind me." A hard little smile streaked the sheriff's face. "I ain't exactly all damn fool."

"A lot of them said you were not." The handcuffs were clicking now. "But you do make mistakes, Easy. I noticed you studying the shelves of bluffs here only yesterday. Tonight you didn't fool me. A man like you wouldn't go out after Fuzzy Frank Swindell without a rifle hung on his saddle. I know that much, and I set a trap for you, Easy. One at the jail, one here. More men are working for us than any of these yokels think. Hell, two men were watching you when you crawled in that hole to find old man Luke Drinkwater."

"Sorta thought I heard a gravel roll." Sam Easy looked up at the sky as if wondering when the late moon would rise. "But then,"

he shrugged, "gravel just loosens an' rolls by itself in the bluffs now an' then. I've seen whole shelves bust off an' fall."

"You can tell us about that some other time." Sneaky Pete took a firm grip on the link-chain with his left hand and gave his six-shooter another twist. "We'll get going now. No fuss and there'll be no muss, chum. Watch your feet. We don't have a whole park to play around in up here on this rim."

Then Sam Easy was being marched away, the muzzle of the gun still hard against his back, Sneaky Pete's left hand firm on the link-chain between the cuffs. At once he saw that they were heading for a little-used rear door of the bank. A couple of minutes later Sneaky Pete was tapping on the door with his toe.

"Who is it?" hissed a voice as the door cracked open. "Pete?"

"Wouldn't think it was George Washington, would you?" There was the small hint of laughter behind the gunman's voice. "Widen up and let the sheriff of Buckskin River inside. It's getting chilly out here."

Then Sam Easy was inside, the door carefully closed and bolted behind him. With the blinds on the windows drawn he could see that saddle blankets had also been hung over the blinds when old Rice Grant, bending over his desk, turned up the wick of a lamp.

"Good evening, Sam. Nice to have you with us." The banker had turned, rubbing his lean old hands. There in the lamplight Easy had never seen him look more like a buzzard. "I naturally knew we would have a lot of trouble with you, otherwise I might have tried to pull you over on our little side of the fence. Meet your friends."

RICE GRANT stepped to one side then and waved his hand, and Sam Easy's eyes grew big and round for a moment. Sitting in chairs propped against the south wall with their hands behind them were two men who had been the most bitter enemies in the country for the past six months.

Sam Easy had seen Julian Brady and Horth Shell sitting under a draped and blanket-covered west window. Now he was staring at Green Hatfield, and to Green Hatfield's right sat Fuzzy Frank Swindell, looking very calm and tame, all the fight taken out of him.

"And this, gentlemen," Grant bowed and waved his hands like some old ring-master in a circus, "completes the picture, I believe. Here we have Green Hatfield who just about dominates the north bulge of the cow country in spite of Hellfire Buck Allan. And here," he waved at Swindell, "we have our one-time Texas Hank Sawyer, known far and wide in this part of the country as Swindell, undisputed boss of the south bulge of the country."

Bushwhack Day at Buckskin River

No one has ever accused Old Luke Drinkwater of being the boss of anything, not even his own son. Neat, isn't it?"

"Neat!" Julian Brady answered him, the usual big cigar in his face. A man of somewhere just past fifty, he was smiling now, and then Sam Easy saw a slow smile make its way across Horth Shell's round, dark face with its graying hair at the temples. "Only needs one more to complete the picture, and then we can all be satisfied. Better use another pair of the sheriff's splendid supply of handcuffs, Pete. If we run out you can slip back to the jail for more."

"What—what in hell does this mean!" Rice Grant had lurched back against his desk, his face chalky-white on an instant, his long claws of hands jerking upward. "That—that damned fool's got a gun on me! Put—put," his voice dropped to a low squeak, "it down, Mr. Pardeau. I—I'm helping you people."

"I don't take orders from you, old moneybags." Sneaky Pete was grinning now in the lamplight. His six-shooter was back in his hand, the muzzle covering the banker. "Why they want you at this last minute is more than I know, but I follow orders. Put your hands behind your back—right now before I let lamplight through you."

"But—but I'm your friend! I—I'm helping you people!"

"Put 'em, I said." Sneaky Pete's tone had become slippery and nasty. "I don't like to tell a man twice."

"But Julian!" cried the banker.

"Do as Sneaky tells you!" Julian Brady was on his feet now, cigar looking as if clamped in the mouth of a bulldog, dark eyes sparkling below his knitted black brows. "You did a damned sight more than this to me twenty years ago in a certain big Eastern city we both know. I went to the penitentiary for eleven long years for you, Eldon Seller. You came hustling out here and changed your name. It didn't change me. I swore that day in court you'd one day hear the rattlesnake rattle." He threw back his head and laughed. "You hear the rattle now!"

"That's it, just like that!" A pair of handcuffs chattered at that moment on Rice Grant's wrists, but Sneaky Pete was having to hold him a second later. Grant had suddenly slumped backward, jarring the desk and almost upsetting the lamp. "Stand up!"

But there was little need for that order from Sneaky Pete. Sam Easy had caught one good glimpse of the banker's face. Old Doc Chumm had said for years that he had heart trouble and was apt to drop dead anywhere. It looked as if death had come now, even before Sneaky Pete, still cursing him, swung him around and



Become an Expert Accountant

The Profession That Pays

The demand for skilled accountants—men who really know their business—is increasing. National and state legislation is requiring of business—both big and small—much more in matters relating to Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important field are promoted to responsible executive positions—given an opportunity to earn real salaries. The range is from \$3,000 to \$10,000 a year, even to higher income figures.

Send for Free Book—

"Accountancy, the Profession That Pays"

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you may equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable, growing profession?

Knowledge of bookkeeping unnecessary. Our free book on accountancy fully explains how we train you from ground up, or according to your individual needs. Low cost; easy terms.

The facts about the new LaSalle training in Accountancy and the opportunities in this highly profitable field are clearly outlined in a 48-page book which LaSalle will send you free.

The man in earnest to get ahead will find this coupon a most profitable aid to progress. If you have the urge and the will to increase your income, clip and mail the coupon NOW.

G. I. APPROVED

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

Dept. 2334-HA 417 So. Dearborn St. Chicago 5

I would welcome details of opportunities in accounting, together with copy of "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," without obligation.

☐ **Higher Accountancy**

Other LaSalle Opportunities:

LaSalle opens the way to success in every important field of business. If interested in one of the fields below, check and mail.

☐ Business Management

☐ Modern Salesmanship

☐ Traffic Management

☐ Foremanship

☐ Industrial Management

☐ Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)

☐ Law—Degree of LL.B.

☐ Commercial Law

☐ Modern Business

☐ Correspondence

☐ Expert Bookkeeping

☐ C. P. A. Coaching



Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE

Borrow \$50 to \$300

Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow **BY MAIL** \$50.00 to \$300.00 this easy quick confidential way.

BY MAIL

IT IS EASY TO BORROW BY MAIL!

Completely confidential and private. Convenient Monthly Payments

NO ENDORSERS NEEDED
EMPLOYED MEN and women of good character can solve their money problems quickly and in privacy with loans **MADE BY MAIL**. No endorsers or co-signers. We do not contact employers, friends or relatives. Convenient monthly payments. Send us your name and address and we will mail application blank and complete details **FREE** in plain envelope. There is no obligation.

STATE FINANCE CO.

514 Walker Bank Bldg., Dept. G-71, Salt Lake City 9, Utah

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 36 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. L.L.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for **FREE BOOK** "Law and Executive Guidance"—NOW!

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 74-B, 846 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 22, Ill.

START YOUR OWN BUSINESS

on our capital. Always your own boss. Hundreds average \$6,000 to \$25,000 annual sales year after year. We supply stocks, equipment on credit, 300 home necessities. Selling experience unnecessary to start. Wonderful opportunity to own pleasant, profitable business backed by world wide industry. Write **RAWLSON CO.**, Dept. B-U-P-E-L, Peapack, Illinois.



Locksmithing AND KEY MAKING Now Made Easy!

Practical up-to-date course teaches you how to pick locks, de-code, make masterkeys, repair, install, service, etc. Now self-instruction lessons for every locksmith, a homeowner, carpenter, mechanic, service station operator, fix-it shop, hardware dealer, gunsmith. 66 easy illustrated lessons. Low price! Satisfaction! Free details, write

NELSON CO., 1139 So. Wabash Ave., Dept. B05, Chicago 3, Ill.



Ready to Highball

—with a clear board for February, Railroad Magazine is out on the mainline again with a full consist of fact articles, photo stories and fiction. \$2.50 by the year. Address:

RAILROAD MAGAZINE

205 East 42nd Street, New York City 17

DON'T SUFFER FROM SKIN IRRITATION

due to ✓chafing from braces, trusses, girdles, corsets, etc. ✓bed sores ✓itching

NEW! Get wonderful new quick relief from skin irritation, itching, burning due to friction, rubbing, chafing—with amazing new Mennen **QUICOOL** powder! New scientific formula perfected by Mennen skin specialists—works fast, helps prevent and relieve chafing, bed sores, many externally-caused rashes. Wonderful too for baby's diaper rash, prickly heat, etc. Smooth on mild, soothing **QUICOOL** powder after bath also—refreshing, light scent. Get **QUICOOL** now for entire family. **GUARANTEED:** Double your money back if not satisfied.

QUICK! GET

MENNEEN QUICOOL

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

let him sprawl out full-length on the floor. "And the rattle of the rattler," a grin on Julian Brady's dark face made him look like a laughing fat devil, "knocks him cold."

IT LOOKED like the end of everything when Old Luke Drinkwater was brought up, shaking with cold, cringing, it seemed, from his own shadow. By this time Grant was back to life, a couple of glasses of cold tap water enough to start his feet kicking as it was poured on his face and inside the bosom of his shirt.

Now Sam Easy saw high-handed robbery in its worst form. Old Luke had completely gone to pieces, but there was some little fight yet left in him when they jammed him down at the desk and shoved a pen in his freed right hand. He hurled the pen aside and was about to lurch to his feet when Sneaky Pete, standing behind his chair, slammed him back. A second later, had it not been for the gag in his mouth, men might have heard the old man's yell far down the street in spite of the carefully closed doors and covered windows.

"Sign them!" As he spoke Sneaky Pete, having lighted a fat cigar, brought fire down on the back of the old man's neck. "Sign!"

It took only a more stabs of the end of the burning cigar before Drinkwater's hand was snatching for the pen and writing his name in a big scrawl on paper after paper the smiling Horth Shell shoved in front of him. Then he flopped back, out of breath, tears in the old eyes, a white froth working itself out around the gag.

"Hatfield and this fellow who calls himself Swindell were not half as tough as you were." Shell could laugh now. "Get our friend behind the desk, Sneaky."

Drinkwater was brushed aside then, wrists rehandcuffed behind him, and the banker was shoved behind his desk.

"Twenty years ago," he said, "I did a wrong. I stole money from a bank and let you sing for it." His eyes were on Brady. "Tonight, I suppose, I'll pay for it with my life. What you will do to my bank and this town and country is something I don't know. None of us will know." The handcuff had been taken from his left wrist. He waved his right hand, the cuff hanging there. "Sink Hole Bend will swallow us. That will be the end, the vanishing point—"

"Sign and no speech-making!" snapped Shell as he shoved papers in front of the banker. "Keep that for Saint Peter!"

"Or let me cigar 'im a little." Sneaky Pete stepped forward, grinning, the cigar ready. "It'll move any of them."

"Like this, d' you mean?"

Bushwhack Day at Buckskin River

Rice Grant might have waited a little while longer. Sam Easy told himself that as the old man flashed into action, both hands above the top of the desk, desperation asserting itself. Sneaky Pete was to his right, bent slightly forward. The sudden smash of the handcuffed hand caught the killer in the face and mouth, knocking him backward, the flying rush of blood splattering over the desk. Then, before Shell could stop him, the free left hand had struck the lamp, sending it crashing against the wall to plunge the room into darkness.

It was Sam Easy's one long chance. The handcuffs behind him were old, the link-chain worn in half. With one fierce surge he broke it, his big hands flying apart. Sneaky Pete was right in front of him and had thrown both hands to his face, the wicked cigar in his left hand, and by the glow the sheriff struck his first blow, a long, sweeping haymaker that landed squarely on the back of Sneaky Pete's neck, knocking him half-way across the desk.

"Watch Grant!" The warning came from Horth Shell. "Make a light, quick!"

Brady made the light, an instant flash from a stubby black Colt that had been jerked from his hip pocket. By the flash he saw what had happened to Sneaky Pete, and he fired a second shot, this time at Sam Easy, but Sam Easy was not there to stop the bullet. He dropped at the end of the desk, grabbing the limp Sneaky Pete by the legs.

Easy was a tiger in action now, a man who cared no more about these big-town hoodlums than the gophers in the old basement cells of the jailhouse. Blood dripping from his wrists, he swung Sneaky Pete upward. Before Brady could fire another shot the unconscious Pete was flying through the air to strike Brady in the chest and knock him down, his head hitting the wall and dazing him.

"Don't wake the whole damned town with that shooting!" Shell snarled, still the coolest one in the lot now that the sudden fury had broken loose. Easy heard him then, stumbling over a chair. "No, you don't, Rice Grant!"

It seemed a race was going on beyond the desk. The fear of death upon him, Grant was trying to get into the front room of the bank and slam the door behind him. In his rush he carried Shell off his feet, both men struggling on the floor, Grant fighting like a wildcat gone crazy at the world.

But Sam Easy was not listening to it. He was going forward in a rush, his big fists swinging like clubs, the one hope in his mind that Hatfield and Swindell, both seasoned fighting men in any kind of a jam, would have sense enough to rock themselves over in their chairs to the floor.

Without Sneaky Pete it might have been

THE BROMPTON MECHANICAL PENCIL

The Mechanical Better Looking Pencil of Unusual Interest

ALL METAL

ALUMINUM

This is the pencil that is arousing so much interest wherever it is on display. DIFFERENT UNUSUAL and VERY ATTRACTIVE. Precision is built into the BROMPTON PENCIL to LAST and SERVE with FAITHFUL PERFORMANCE. You will instantly notice the difference. It catches the eye.

in very attractive colors:

MAROON, BLUE, BLACK AND NATURAL

ON SALE EVERYWHERE FOR ONLY \$1.00

the pencil you will be proud to carry

In 4 ATTRACTIVE COLORS - It gives you the preference of color that you like best in a precision built pencil made of DURABLE ALUMINUM built for long and faithful service.

If your dealer does not have them... then mail order direct.

BROMPTON SALES CO. Dept. P-2
3171 No. Halsted St. CHICAGO 13

AUTHENTIC WESTERN
SADDLE RING
FOR MEN! & WOMEN!
PURE STERLING SILVER

Only \$4.95

Postpaid We Pay Tax

First time at anywhere near this low price! Authentic replica of romantic western saddle. Hand-somely formed from solid Sterling Silver by Navajo Indian craftsmen. Massive style for men, dainty style for women. A gift of distinction. A pleasure to wear. Sent on approval.

SEND NO MONEY! Just clip this ad and mail with your name and address. Pay postman only \$4.95 plus few cents postage on arrival; or send cash and we pay postage. Wear this sensational ring for 10 days. If not delighted, return for full refund. ORDER NOW! Use COUPON BELOW!

10 DAY TRIAL ORDER COUPON

ARIZONA CRAFTSMEN ROOM 617C
1904 FARNAM ST. OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

SEND Sterling Saddle Ring as I have indicated below.

☐ C.O.D. ☐ Cash Enclosed, Send Postpaid

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

☐ Men's

☐ Women's

Ring Size _____

FOOT RELIEF in 2 minutes!

DO THIS DAILY: Get wonderful quick relief and healthier feet with this exercise recommended by most Chiropractors (foot specialists). Bend feet under, flex from side to side, curl toes down, spread toes apart; repeat 10 times. Then massage feet, and between toes, with soothing Mennen QUINSANA fungicidal foot powder. Comforts, peeps up feet. Amazingly effective against Athlete's Foot, excessive perspiration, foot odor. Shake QUINSANA in shoes daily. Get QUINSANA now for greater foot comfort.

MENNEN QUINSANA

High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H.S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-249, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37



TOOTHACHE? DUE TO CAVITY

GET QUICK, amazing relief by placing Dent's Tooth Gum—Or Drops—in cavity of aching tooth. Follow directions. Cavity toothache frequently strikes when you can't see dentist. Be prepared. Ask your druggist for package. Keep handy for children, too.

DENT'S TOOTH GUM 25¢
TOOTH DROPS

MAKE THIS SUIT YOURS NEW PLAN



EARN CASH SHOWING TO FRIENDS!

Write at once if you want this fine made-to-measure suit! You can get it by taking a few orders from friends, and earn up to \$10, \$12 in a day. Your bonus suit helps you take more orders with latest style, made-to-measure guaranteed suits at amazingly low prices. Also complete line of Ladies' Tailored Suits. No experience, no money needed. Write TODAY for FREE SAMPLES—telling about yourself—age, etc. No obligation! **PIONEER TAILORING CO.** Dept. P-1096, Chicago 7, Ill.

NEW CHEAP OIL BURNER

FOR COOKING & HEATING STOVES-FURNACES
HEAT YOUR HOME, COOK YOUR MEALS
WITH CHEAP FURNACE OIL



NO MORE SHOVELING COAL OR ASHES. A New Fuelizer Starter Vaporizing System turns Cheap 130 Flash Furnace Oil, Dieselate, Kerosene, etc. into Oil Gas heat without clogging up. LIFETIME GUARANTEE against defects. \$1.00 Bonus Offer for telling. We will let you in on your own stove or furnace for one month. Get yours for introducing. Big Profits QUICK. Be first. Send in your name TODAY. **NORTHWEST MFG. CO.,** 550-B 5th, Mitchell, So. Dakota



ITCH CHECKED IN A JIFFY

Sufferers from the torturing itch caused by eczema, pimples, scales, scabies, athlete's foot, "factory" itch, and other itch troubles are praising cooling, liquid **D. D. D. Prescription**. This time-proved medication—developed by Dr. D. D. Dennis—positively relieves that cruel, burning itch. Greaseless and stainless. Soothes and comforts even the most intense itching in a jiffy. A 35¢ trial bottle proves its merits or your money back. Ask your druggist today for **D. D. D. Prescription**.

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

over in a matter of seconds. Sam Easy got in one wild haymaker that landed high on a head, slamming down a hard hat that told him the receiver of the blow was Brady. Then he felt something twist around on the floor, brush against his legs and knock him sprawling.

Sneaky Pete was never to be counted down and out until he was dead and laid out on a plank. He was once more back in circulation. The smashing into Brady seemed to have somehow revived him. Still dazed, but with plenty of fight left in him, he had dropped his six-shooter. But now he had another weapon, a tooth-plugger .32 with crosses cut in the ends of the bullets to make them split and fly in four directions once they had struck their target—deadly slugs of lead if he could only get the muzzle of his gun in the right man's belly.

But Sneaky Pete was not staying there, not going to continue any fool fight in a room where he could not see his own hand in front of him. Up like a human rat, he shot to the side door, yanking it open and flinging to his right, gaining the advantage of the wall, his deadly little gun out now and ready for a kill.

FOR A MOMENT it gave Sam Easy a break. The moon was just beginning to throw a wide flair of light over the Crazy Bones, and some of the light came through the open doorway. It was enough for him to see Brady up and against the wall, his stubby six-shooter glinting on the floor at his feet.

Tired of using his big hands as mauls, Sam Easy grabbed the six-shooter as he came up, tearing into action. He hit one blow, a terrible, smashing lick straight to Brady's face and mouth, and Julian Brady was down, probably not knowing whether he had been hit by a man or the crack Westbound Limited that had brought him out into this country.

"I've got him!" Horth Shell sounded addled by the commotion. He was coming around the desk, dragging the limp figure of Rice Grant by the collar. "Maybe cracked his skull—Damn!"

The sheriff of Buckskin River had swung on him, his first blow a trifle short of its mark, only the end of the barrel catching Shell in the mouth to send several gold-capped teeth flying. Before he could recover Easy had struck a better blow, a solid smash to the side of the face—and Horth Shell was out cold behind the desk, the unconscious Rice Grant sprawling where he had been dropped.

"Look out for Sneaky!" The warning came from low on the floor, the voice that of Green Hatfield. "He's just outside the door waitin' for yuh, Sam. See?" All the words had come in a low tone, the last in a tense whisper. "See his shadow?"

Bushwhack Day at Buckskin River

Sam Easy saw it. Sneaky Pete, he reckoned, didn't have the gumption of a bald buzzard, standing there with that growing light over the Crazy Bones behind him. In a second Easy was at the door, six-shooter slipped to his left hand. When it came to rats like Sneaky Pete a man did not stand and fool, no more than one would take chances with a rattler. Sam Easy simply slammed his left hand forward, hooked it to the right, and before a man could blink two shots had filled the night, one bullet hitting his man in the right arm, the other tearing straight through his belly.

Then Sam Easy heard something else that startled him. All Buckskin River was suddenly bursting into gunfire, with the thunder of racing hoofs, the yelling of men and the slamming of doors sounding above the crash of weapons.

"It's Highlanders an' Drinkwaters, Sam." The admission came from the floor against the wall where Fuzzy Frank Swindell and Green Hatfield had rocked themselves over in their chairs. "It was a cut an' dried mess since 'fore sundown. There's plenty of Crazy Boners, Rafter Arrows an' Hatfield men left in town. Ever'body knowed they'd stay late to celebrate. I sneaked back to sorter help direct it, an' they made me a prisoner here in the bank just a little while 'fore Green was brought in on the end of a gun by Sneaky. We've got to stop it. Our guns are in the end drawer of the desk. . . ."

He was saying more, but half of what he had already said was lost in the furious noise outside. It seemed as if a desperate, last-stand fight was being made in front of the bank.

Sam Easy never moved faster. With a handcuff key taken from his watch pocket, he had Hatfield, Swindell and Old Luke free in a minute, Old Luke ripping the gag from his mouth.

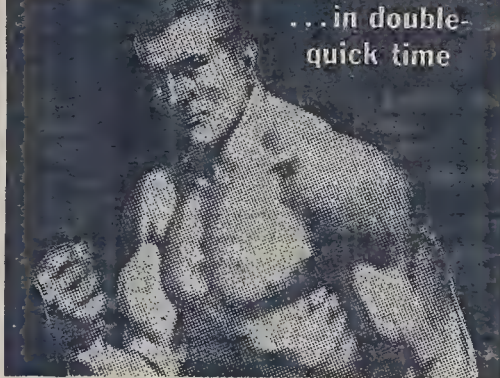
"Grab yourself each a man!" he snapped now. "Then we'll light the big lamps in the front room and throw open them wide an' fancy doors old Rice said he paid so much money for. By now, yuh damn fools oughta have had enough of yore cow pool!"

They were moving into the front room then, Easy dropping his man to light the big swinging lamps that would throw light all the way across the street. In two or three minutes more drapes were snatched off the wide front windows, the blinds run all the way to the top. Then the doors were thrown open, and the four men stepped forward in the light, Old Luke dragging the body of Sneaky Pete, each of the other three an unconscious figure.

For a minute it was like stepping straight into a roaring hell. Gunfire tore from each side of the street. Men were crowded into doorways, down on their hands and knees in

"Let me show **YOU** too, HOW TO MAKE YOURSELF COMMANDO-TOUGH

...in double-
quick time



...OR IT WON'T COST YOU A CENT!"

says *George F. Jowett*

WORLD'S GREATEST BODY BUILDER

Let me prove to YOU that you can put inches of dynamic muscles on your arms! Add inches to your chest! Broaden your shoulders and power-pack the rest of your body. I can do for you what I've done for thousands the world over, including many officers and men now in the U. S. and British Armed Forces!

GIVE ME 10 MINUTES A DAY!

I'll Show You My Secrets of Body Building

I'll help you learn the "Progressive Power Method" through which I rebuilt myself from a physical wreck to the holder of more strength records than any other living athlete or teacher! No matter how skinny or shabby you are, you can learn my methods right in your own home. Through my proved secrets I show you how to develop your power, inside and out, until YOU are fully satisfied that you are the man you want to be. "The Jowett System," says R. F. Kelly, Physical Director of the YMCA, Atlantic City, "is the greatest in the world!"

If you want a physique that will inspire respect from men and admiration from women . . . ACT LIKE A HE-MAN! Decide at once! The famous book, "Nerves of Steel—Muscles Like Iron" will be included FREE! Priceless for the strength fan! Full of photos of marvelous power-bodied men who will show you what Jowett has done for them and how he can do the same for you. Reach out . . . Grasp this Special Offer today!

Jowett Institute, Dept. P-72
230 Fifth Avenue
New York 1, N. Y.

PROVE TO YOURSELF IN ONE NIGHT!

Send only 25c for test Course, "Molding a Mighty Arm." Read it the evening it arrives—learn from experience the thrill you can give your muscles!

SEND FOR THESE FIVE
FAMOUS COURSES IN
BOOK FORM
ONLY 25c EACH
or ALL 5 for \$1.00

QUICK ACTION BRINGS

**THIS
BOOK
FREE!**



PHOTO BOOK OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN **FREE**



Jowett Institute of Physical Culture,
230 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N. Y. Dept. P-72

George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below, for which I enclose (). Include FREE book of PHOTOS.

George F. Jowett Champion of
☐ All 5 courses for . . . \$1 ☐ Molding Mighty Legs 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Arm 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Grip 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Back 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Chest 25c
Champions ☐ Send all 5 C.O.D. (\$1 plus postage.) No orders less than \$1 sent C.O.D.

NAME (Print name) Age

ADDRESS

Beware Coughs from common colds That Hang On

• Creomulsion relieves promptly because it goes right to the seat of the trouble to help loosen and expel germ laden phlegm, and aid nature to soothe and heal raw, tender inflamed bronchial mucous membranes. Tell your druggist to sell you a bottle of Creomulsion with the understanding you must like the way it quickly allays the cough or you are to have your money back.

CREOMULSION
For Coughs, Chest Colds, Bronchitis

Opportunity of Lifetime

Supplying DDT and other profitable products to farmers. No experience or capital required. Must have auto and good references. Permanent. Write or wire.

McNESS COMPANY

Dept. 716-47

Freeport, Illinois

INVENTORS

Patent laws encourage the development of inventions. Our firm is registered to practice before the U. S. Patent Office. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.

McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

1506 Victor Building

Washington 4, D. C.

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 46 years.

Benj. M. Bogue, Dept. 2887, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

GET THIS
FREE
BOOK!

Train Your Own HORSES!

Coffs - Stock Horses - Circus Horses
Gait Show Horses - Write for FREE BOOK
ANIMAL LOVERS' ASSOCIATION
Box G-111, Tarzana, Calif.



Backache Whipped By Man and Wife

If you suffer from Backache, Leg or Rheumatic pains, Nervousness, Swollen Ankles, Burning Passages, Bladder Weakness, or Getting Up Nights, due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles, you may easily enjoy the delightful benefits experienced by thousands who have depended on Cystex for such troubles. The following letter from a well-known Massachusetts housewife is typical of those received from Cystex users all over the world: "I was so laid up with pains in my back, legs and arms that I was miserable. Finally I decided to try your Cystex. In a couple of weeks I was like a new person, the pains had left and I could walk anywhere. My husband had pains in his arms, took Cystex and the pains left." To prove what Cystex may do to bring you joyous help from the distress due to above mentioned Kidney and Bladder troubles, get Cystex from your druggist. Give it a fair trial exactly according to the simple directions. Unless completely satisfied and delighted with your rapid improvement, your money back is guaranteed. So don't suffer another day without trying Cystex.

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

alleyways, hiding behind any cover they could find. Then Swindell and Old Luke were yelling at the tops of their voices:

"Shut 'er down, Highlanders an' Drinkwaters. Shut 'er down! This is Luke Drinkwater. The cow pool's settled."

Minutes later Sam Easy made one attempt to get his prisoners to the jailhouse, but he knew that it was useless at the start. Crazy Boners, Hatfield men, Highlanders and Drinkwaters swarmed around him, their part of the fight over. They pinned his arms behind him; then a gang swung him to their shoulders, swarming on up to the jailhouse with him, Grant, Brady and Shell yelling bloody murder behind him. In the office of the jail they pushed him into a chair, and somebody held a pint of whiskey to his lips. It was either drink or drown in it, and he gulped half of it down.

* * *

By eleven o'clock in the morning he had had his coffee and was sitting in the old chair again on the porch. Buckskin River was still filled with men who had been fighting each other only hours before, but Sam Easy had never seen the town so quiet. Several men had left the town, including Judge Scully, Gage Lantry and Roosh Hendry. Probably a dozen others were going away on a little vacation until things at least cooled down, Sam Easy reckoned. It was the quickest ending of a war he had ever seen in all his time in this rip-roaring Buckskin River country! Because of his age, they had said, a gang had brought old Rice Grant up to the jailhouse with his coat torn off and the seat of his pants kicked out. Three more men—hoodlums from a big town who had thought they could pull high-handed robbery and get away with it out here—were down there in the back room of Doc Chumm's dingy office, sprawled on tables along with Cockeyed Ike.

Yep, it was shore peaceful now. Boots lay asleep on the porch. Sam Easy was dozing when a buggy pulled up and Mattie Martha Hatfield got out, looking sweeter'n red stickcandy in her Sunday go-to-meetin' clothes. He met her at the foot of the steps, staring at the big basket in her hand.

"Fried sage hens and chicken and biscuits like you like them, Sam!" she told him, looking up at him, for some reason, with a quivering lip and moisture in her eyes. "Dad came in at sunrise and told us. Can I come in?"

"If yuh do," he said, "I may not let yuh out so easy. Yuh see," he looked down the street, "I've been tryin' to ask yuh somethin' for a long time. This fool war, I think, has give me just guts enough to do it. Come on before I lose my nerve, Martha."

THE END

SODBUSTERS WANTED—DEAD!

(Continued from page 57)

struggling and panting in his effort, when May Bradley and three of the Cross cowhands came thundering into the yard.

May slipped from her mount and ran to Jim, too frightened to cry. But she soon had bandages around his two wounds, and was helping him to his feet.

The Cross boys were grouped around old Scotty MacLean. The cowman's heavy growling curses rumbled from his throat when one of the cowhands tied a tight handkerchief over the bloody hole in his shoulder.

Later, in the buckboard on the way to town and Willow Grove's sawbones, MacLean winked slyly at May, and grinned.

"You wouldn't want to hire out that man of yours, would you?" he asked. "I'd sorta like to give him a job on that line camp back there for the winter. A salty jasper like him oughta scare off any hungry Injuns, or slow-elkers."

Color came back into May's wan face.

"Why—why, I don't know, Mr. MacLean," she answered. "I'm afraid Jim will be pretty busy on our place."

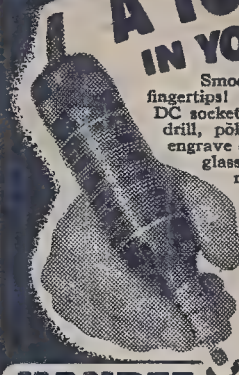
Scotty shook his big head.

"No'm, he won't," he chuckled. "That hay he put up, he ain't got but them two old crow-baits to feed it to, them an' your milch cow. He's goin' to sell me the hay for my critters, an' then he won't need to cut his fence. Yep, I'll throw my bunch of cows down on my south range." He grinned across at Jim.

Jim grinned back and stuck out his hand. The two men gripped, and one of the punchers let out a wild "Yippee."

"Takes all kinds to tame this here raw country," MacLean said. "Reckon I been a stubborn old fool."

"Two of us," Jim nodded, "but no more." He looked at May then, and grinned sheepishly. "You told me Scotty was all right," he told her, "but I had to be showed. The hard way."



A TOOLSHOP IN YOUR HAND

Smooth, steady power at your fingertips! Plug Handee in any AC or DC socket, and you're ready to grind, drill, polish, rout, carve, sand, saw, engrave on metal, wood, plastic, horn, glass, etc. Weighs 12 oz. 25,000 r.p.m. In steel case with complete accessory assortment, postpaid, \$27.50. Handee only with 7 accessories, \$20.50.

A Fine Gift for a Friend or Yourself! Order Now! Prompt Delivery

FREE! 52-Page Manual!

CHICAGO WHEEL & MFG. CO.
2301 Monroe St., Dept. F8,
Chicago 7, Ill.

HANDEE

TOOL OF 1001 USES

ANYONE CAN DO THIS IF THEY HAVE OUR CHART

Blue Print 27"x36" now printed on both sides showing squares full size. Shows how to find the length of any rafter, find any angle in degrees, frame any polygon 3 to 16 sides, read the board foot and brace tables, octagon scale, rafter tables, many other uses can be scaled down for model work as well as full scale framing. Also chart changing pitches to degrees. For use with radial saws. About 13 square feet of printed copy. Sent post paid for \$3. Money order or check—no stamps. MASON ENGINEERING SERVICE, 2104 N. Burdick St., Dept. 2, Kalamazoo, MI.

SPECIAL OFFER FOR AGENTS

DRAW for MONEY!

Be An ARTIST!

Trained Artists Are Capable of Earning \$50, \$60, \$75 a Week

It's pleasant and interesting to study Art the W.S.A. way. COMMERCIAL ART, DESIGNING, CARTOONING all in ONE complete home study course. No previous Art experience necessary—hundreds have profited by our practical methods since 1914. TWO ART OPPORTUNITIES furnished. Full information in **FREE BOOK**. "Art for Pleasure and Profit." Write today. Course available under "G.I." Bill.

FREE BOOK gives details

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART,
Studio 242-H, 1115 15th St., N.W.,
Washington 5, D. C.

NAME..... AGE.....
Street.....
City..... Zone () State.....

Now A DYNAMIC HEAVY DUTY INDUSTRIAL WELDER

FOR ONLY \$23.50 COMPLETE... AVAILABLE NOW IMMEDIATE DELIVERIES

IDEAL FOR AUTO - HOME APPLIANCE AND FARM REPAIRS

DESIGNED TO DO HIGH GRADE WELDING INEXPENSIVELY—Maintenance Men; Farmers; Mechanics; Machine Shops; Foundries; Auto, General Repair and Job Welding Shops; all using the DYNAMIC find it so indispensable and useful that they cannot afford to be without it. If inexperienced, you can easily learn to do a variety of high grade welding jobs by following the practical, simplified operating and welding instructions furnished. Once you see a DYNAMIC in operation, you won't want to be without it. Its simplicity will amaze you. In a year the DYNAMIC only costs you about a day. Helmet, rods, cables, holder and operating instructions, etc., furnished.

SAVES YOU VALUABLE TIME AND MONEY!

This portable DYNAMIC WELDER—easily carried to the job—can be operated from any convenient, properly wired 110 volt, 60 cycle line. Can also be supplied for 220 volt, 60 cycle operation and for other voltages and cycles at slight additional cost. Works on IRON, STEEL, BRASS, BRONZE, AND OTHER METALS—has 8 metallic and carbon arc welding heat stages—does work you would think only possible with larger more expensive machine.

DYNAMIC WELDER CO. • 13 East 23rd St., NH, Chicago 16, Ill.

Member Chicago Association of Commerce

WHITE TODAY TYPE PARTICULARS Get details on our 10 day trial offer

Labels on the left: FARM IMPLEMENTS, BICYCLE REPAIRS, HOME APPLIANCES, SHOP WORK, AUTOMOBILE REPAIRS

How to Start YOUR OWN BUSINESS

Amazing Postwar Development Now Gives
You the Opportunity to Make Money Fast!
Starting scientific discovery, just now becoming available for general use, will enable you to start your business and reap great profits! Plastics, one of the most revolutionizing and rapidly expanding industries, offers a great opportunity to all enterprising men and women. This is one of the few industries in which home manufacturers thrive and prosper. You can start even on a spare time basis in your own home, and expand rapidly into a full time business, paying good profits.

LIQUID MARBLE
Make **LIQUID MARBLE** the amazing Plastic, with a thousand uses. **LIQUID MARBLE** can be poured into **FLEXIBLE MOLDS** for casting all kinds of artistic and serviceable articles such as: ornaments, novelties, desk sets, paper weights, book-ends, souvenirs, statuary, toys, etc.

FLEXIBLE MOLDS
Make your own **FLEXIBLE MOLDS**. The cost is low—in fact, a large sized mold costs but a few cents. Hundreds of casts can be taken from a single mold.

NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED!
No skill or previous knowledge is necessary. All you do is follow our easy-to-understand instructions.

UNLIMITED MARKET
The market is literally unlimited. You will find steady year-round demand in your own community. Your product will be in selling but in supplying the huge pent-up demand. Moreover, we supply you with names of big buyers for your finished products.

WRITE TODAY
Bing Products will show you how to start with a small investment and build a permanent, independent, profitable business! Don't fail to grasp this opportunity! Write today for **FREE CATALOG**.

BING PRODUCTS

Dept. M1, 88 Broad Street, BOSTON 10, MASS.

MAKE BIG WAGES IN WELDING

Learn welding in all its phases in modern welding school. Experienced welder-instructors, individual instruction. Qualified under G. I. Bill. Write for **FREE** booklet.

HOBART TRADE SCHOOL, BOX G-27, TROY, OHIO

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure booklet containing information concerning patent protection and procedure—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

726-A District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

Learn to **MOUNT BIRDS**

Tan SKINS, Make Up FURS
Be a Taxidermist. We teach you at Home.
Mount Birds, Animals, Pets, Game Heads, Fish.
Save your hunting trophies; decorate home and den. **MAKE MONEY**. Mount and Embroider for others. Big spare-time profit.

FREE BOOK 100 game pictures and pages. Hunters. Send post card **TODAY**. State your **AGE**.
NORTHWEST SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY
Dept. 3362 Omaha, Nebraska

Learn Profitable Profession
in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50—Many Swedish Massage graduates make \$40, \$75 or even more per week. Larger full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diplomas. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book **FREE NOW! The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 795B, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 12**

HUNTING and FISHING

is a monthly magazine crammed full of hunting, fishing, camping, dog and boating stories and pictures, invaluable information about guns, fishing tackle, game law changes, best places to fish and hunt—countless ideas that will add more fun to your days afield.

Special Trial Offer
Send 25c in stamps or coin and we will send you **Hunting & Fishing** for six months.

HUNTING & FISHING

MAGAZINE, 250 Sportsman's Bldg., Boston, Mass.

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 107)

Obadiah heard Scarface working round behind him. The blackness was paling ever so little. Ten yards away, Soapy's pony was an indistinct blob. But Nason and Scarface were still beyond his vision.

So he would be beyond theirs. With his lean frame hugging the ground, Obadiah began working backwards toward the pony. Grim resolution possessed him. He weighed the two rannies in the balance against the welfare of the nesters and their cattle's lives and found them wanting.

He intended to down them as he would a lobo that was stalking an unguarded calf. There was a good chance that he would die himself, but he didn't pray. He wasn't afraid of death.

He stopped crawling. It was getting too light. He came to a knee, with .45 leveled. He faced the well, at right angles to the tensed Nason and his gunny.

They were ready. In another second—"Now! Let's get him!" snarled Nason.

Instantly they came charging in. Their guns were roaring. The explosions lighted the scene with a pulsing glare that increased as they neared each other.

Five yards from the well they slowed. Then Obadiah's first slug drilled Scarface sideways through the chest and the gunny spread-eagled on the ground and clawed convulsively.

Nason swung and fired at Obadiah's gun-flash. The preacher heard it smash into the dead pony behind him. He loosed powder again.

Nason cursed. Then he dropped his gun that Obadiah's slug had smashed from his numbed hand. He turned, to lumber fast away in the darkness.

Obadiah fired again . . . and knew he'd missed. Then he smiled grimly. The Lord was delivering the wicked into his hand.

Nason was fumbling with the tethered Stonewall's tie rope! Obadiah levered up and ran forward as the big man started to swing up on the stallion's back. His seat touched saddle once, then he went flying out into the darkness. Obadiah was there to welcome him with bare knuckles. But Nason was as full of fight as a cornered bobcat. He came scrambling up and met Obadiah with hammering fists. Now it was man to man, with no gun help.

Nason cursed and foamed, but Obadiah slugged it out with clenched jaws. The two were well matched. Obadiah had the height, although Nason outweighed him by twenty pounds. But the preacher made that lardy belly pay him dividends by driving steaming hooks to the other's midriff.

The Pistol Preachment of Obadiah Jones

Obadiah felt the blood from his mashed nose dribbling down over his lips and felt his right eye closing. Then he caught Nason an overhanded smash that drove the big man down on his haunches. Nason ducked under his following swing and clinched.

They wrestled furiously, butting and heeling and slugging madly. Then Nason felt his wind going and tried to break away. Obadiah clung to him grimly.

Then Nason did a foolish thing. With his free hand he raked down Obadiah's craggy face with his nails and his clenching fingers closed on the minister's flaming red beard.

He yanked viciously. A yelp was wrung from Obadiah's lips. Unthinking, he hearkened back to his campaign days and cursed Nason lustily.

Then, in righteous anger, his great corded arms swung around behind Nason's back and he squeezed prodigiously. The man's ribs were near popping when he screamed and collapsed on the ground.

When the returning homesteaders came spurring up, he had Nason pinned solidly to the ground. Somebody discovered that Soapy had only been stunned when his horse went down. While willing hands trussed the cursing Nason, others carried the saloon keeper close to the well.

"If we had water," somebody said, "we'd bring him around. 'Who'll go for it?'"

"No need," Obadiah replied. "Look!"

A little dome of water was crowding up over the open top of the driven pipe. A few drops spilled over and ran down it. Faster and faster they spilled out as the clogged holes in the pipe, deep down in the water sands, cleared. Then it was gushing out in a steady torrent of cool, sweet water.

Obadiah poured some of the water over the reviving saloon man's face. "Soapy," he said, "have one on the Lord."

NEW MIDGET ELECTRIC ARC WELDER

RETAILS ONLY \$3.95

FULLY GUARANTEED



Plugs into Light Socket AC or DC

It's new! It's handy! It's efficient! Use the Midget Electric Arc Welder for hundreds of light-metal jobs. Does comparable welding work with a 1/16-inch welding rod on thin metal as that of larger and higher priced welders. Operates on 15 ampere fuse, 110 volt 60 cycle A.C. or D.C. current, by use of our special standard-coated 1/16-inch welding rods. Generous supply of rods supplied with machine. Recommended for all light welding like automobile fenders, etc. Take the Midget Arc anywhere to the job. Sturdily built and fully guaranteed. Comes complete—ready to use. Nothing else to buy. No previous welding experience needed to strike an arc. In a short time, anyone mechanically inclined can learn to weld with this machine. You'll find hundreds of money-saving, time-saving uses for the Midget Arc around your home, garage, or workshop. Also in garages, factories, repair shops, tin shops, mechanics, farmers, inventors, etc. Order a Midget Electric Arc Welder now! **SEND NO MONEY.** We'll rush one to you, complete with rods and helmet (equipped with APPROVED welding glass). Pay postman only \$3.00 plus postage charges. If not satisfied, return Midget Arc in 5 days from receipt and we'll refund your money immediately. **RUSH YOUR ORDER NOW!**

MIDGET ARC WELDER CO., Strader Ave., Dept. S-223, Cincinnati 26, Ohio

JOBS NOT BOMBS for AMERICANS

WORK FOR "UNCLE SAM"

START \$1756 to \$3021 Year

Men—Women

Prepare Now for 1947 Examinations. Veterans Get Special Preference.

Mail Coupon Today

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. D-89, Rochester 4, N. Y.

Sirs: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of many U. S. Government Big Pay Jobs. (2) Tell me how to prepare for one of these jobs.

Name _____
Address _____

COUPON

RAILROAD POSTAL CLERK
MAIL CLERK
POST OFFICE CLERK
MANY OTHER JOBS

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits

poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills,



AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL



CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

6 BIG VOLUMES
2800 pages, 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Diesel Engines. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A321
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.

I would like to examine your Six-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you \$2 and pay the balance at the rate of only \$3 a month until \$24.80 has been paid. Please include consulting service as offered above.

Name
Address
City
Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of Six Big Auto Books, 20th Edition. Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this **FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.**

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the **FIFTY INDEX** to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon **TODAY.**

[A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge.]

Vocational Publishers Since 1898



ROUND-UP

A CROSS the dusty prairie where once Indian and buffalo roamed at will, the combine and the tractor now clack their way. The trails that were once dimly marked tracks through the wilderness are now concrete arrows along which modern vehicles stream in never-ending lines. The rustlers and outlaws who once pounded their reckless way with ready guns, stolen stock and bloodstained gold are but a fast-fading memory before the streamlined roadsters and motorcycles of state and county law-enforcement officers. And the wild longhorn, whose ornery spirit stamped many a trail drive, has been replaced by a more placid but beefier descendant.

The West our grandfathers knew is gone, never to return.

The glorious tradition of the West, however, remains unchanged. It is still vibrantly alive, yet it has been set in a pattern where it cannot be touched by the passage of time. It is to this mission that the editors of *Big-Book Western Magazine* have pledged themselves: to preserve, in the living mold of literature, one of the greatest historical epics of our nation.

The buckskin man and the hide hunter have gone the way of the Sharps rifle and the buffalo. The crack of the range-war rifle no longer sounds over the prairie. The trail herds now ride in the cattle car. But in the pages of *Big-Book Western* a man can still hear the thunder of the buffalo herd echoing in the earth. The Indian scout's rifle still booms its message of death. The gaudy lights of Tombstone and Silver City once again flare in the tinsel dance halls, and the rattle of chips and the rhythmic scrape of fiddles and pianos fills the night.

Yes, each month we try to make all the drama and color of the Old West come alive again in the pages of this magazine. Next month's issue features stories by such writers of the frontier as Harry F. Olmstead, Stone Cody, James Shaffer, Gunnison Steele, plus others who know and love the rugged men who blazed the trail for us, in a later, softer, time to follow.

The March issue will be published January 17th.

—THE EDITOR

Now for EVERY WORK SHOP!

NEW Invention Electroplates by BRUSH



Easy to Plate CHROMIUM GOLD, SILVER, NICKEL, COPPER

... For Pleasure and Profit!

If you have a workshop—at home or in business—you need this new Warner Electroplater. At the stroke of an electrified brush, you can electroplate models and projects—you can replate worn articles, faucets, tools, fixtures, silverware, etc. with a durable, sparkling coat of metal... Gold, Silver, Chromium, Nickel, Copper or Cadmium. Method is easy, simple, quick. Everything furnished—equipment complete, ready for use. By doing a bit of work for others, your machine can pay for itself within a week. So make your shop complete by getting a Warner Electroplater right away. Send today for **FREE SAMPLE** and illustrated literature. **ACT AT ONCE!** Mail Coupon.

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., DEPT. L-20
1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Ill.

FREE Details & Sample!

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., 1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Dept. L-20
Gentlemen: Send Free Sample and Details to:

Name
Address
City State

HOLLYWOOD'S TEN MOST BEAUTIFUL BRUNETTES

... All with motives for Murder!

"ONE OF THESE
BABES SAW THE
SONGWRITER KILLED...
WHEN I FIND HER,
SHE'S GOING TO
SING!"

RKO
PRESENTS

GEORGE RAFT · LYNN BARI

in

NOCTURNE

with

VIRGINIA HUSTON · JOSEPH PEVNEY
MYRNA DELL



Produced by JOAN HARRISON
Directed by EDWIN L. MARIN
Screen Play by JONATHAN LATIMER





"Hmm—more smart people making tracks for Calvert!"

The sensible trend's to Calvert! Sensible...
because it's the "whiskey of moderation"...blessed with
friendly lightness...congenial taste...all-around
whiskey agreeableness. We suggest you try it. Then you,
too, will understand why...

Clear Heads Choose Calvert

Calvert

BLENDED WHISKIES

Reserve **OR** *Special*

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits...Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits